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UNCHARTED 4

ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED

FINAL FANTASY XV

DETROIT

MAFIA III

THE REAL SCIENCE BEHIND NO MAN'S SKY

DARK SOULS III

We delve deep into the toughest game in the series yet

WILD

DREAMS

SCALEBOUND

HITMAN

HORIZON ZERO DAWN

DigitalEdition
GreatDigitalMags.com
ISSUE 169
IMAGINE PUBLISHING

The second year of a generation can often be a defining one, as developers get to grips with new hardware, push boundaries and generally settle into their groove. So what has been the overriding theme of this all-important sophomore year for the Xbox One and PS4? For me, it's been stories.

In particular, subtle, adult stories with character development and explorations of action versus consequence. The two games that exemplify this for me are *Life Is Strange* and *The Witcher III*, both of which ultimately boiled down to how you treated and reacted to others to decide the particular outcome you got from each game.

I'll avoid saying too much more for fear of giving away spoilers as both are games you really ought to check out for yourselves, but to my mind, they mark a new milestone for developers and narrative directors making games today. Climactic endings don't need to be binary choices and they don't need to be based on the moral alignment of your character through the game. Sometimes they can be about how you interacted with others. Sometimes the real hero of a story isn't the one who kills the boss.

As we look ahead at 2016 I can see a few titles that might look to play in similar waters. The likes of *Uncharted*, *The Last Guardian*, *Mass Effect Andromeda*, *Detroit*, *Dishonored 2*, *Quantum Break* and *Mafia III* all come from teams well respected and renowned for their commitment to pushing games as a narrative medium. Each has its own style and approach, but I'm excited to see how many will take the shackles off and pick up the challenge laid down by the best of this year's releases.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR







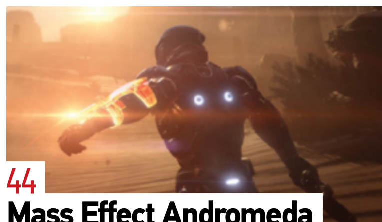
Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 169 | 15



32
The Division

DISCUSS



44
Mass Effect Andromeda

FAVOURITES



FEATURES

RETRO

REVIEWS



78
Star Wars Battlefront

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Turn to page 74

20 Feature

DARK SOULS III

We challenge ourselves with the toughest game of 2016 as we celebrate the coming year of massive new releases

Discuss

NEWS
INDUSTRY GOSSIP
OPINION
YOUR VIEWS

(WHEN CONSOLES CLASH)

2016 could be the best year for gaming ever

→ Before games™ digs deep into the most exciting and innovative games on the near horizon, we explore what the major manufacturers will be doing to keep the console war alive and kicking

Had you asked Shuhei Yoshida what he made of the unprecedented success of the PlayStation 4 a year ago, the Sony Worldwide Studios boss would have celebrated it with cautious optimism; now we can only imagine he's laughing. The PS4 has sold more than 30 million units worldwide, making it the fastest-selling Sony console in PlayStation history – if that isn't cause for celebration, we aren't sure what is. But what does it mean for the competing consoles as 2016 beckons?

This level of success for Sony, this early into the eighth console generation, is truly impressive. It has left Microsoft and Nintendo in something of a precarious position; the Xbox One is struggling to keep up the pace, while Nintendo is just about keeping its head above water. None of that is particularly positive news, and that makes 2016 something of an important year for the two trailing manufacturers. The battle for Input One is reigniting; new consoles are on the horizon, technology is evolving and PC is finally invading the living room via the Steam Machines. There's never been a better time to be a consumer of games, frankly.

There's also never been a better time to be a Nintendo fan as it, surprisingly, looks the most likely of the two to get through 2016 unscathed. Admittedly, you'd be forgiven for thinking that wouldn't be the case. The Wii U has only sold a paltry 10.73 million units worldwide to date – to put that in perspective, the PS4 achieved a similar figure in under a year on sale – and even Nintendo doesn't seem to have great faith in the tide changing. With a pitiful hardware sales projection of just 3.4 million units for the next year, not to mention only 11 games



DATA STREAM → THE OFFICIAL STEAM VR HEADSET, THE HTC VIVE, WILL LAUNCH IN APRIL 2016

slated for release, that isn't exactly a business decision that screams confidence.

But that doesn't mean Nintendo is simply rolling over and admitting defeat. The casual market has changed significantly since the Wii and DS once dominated, and now the company is preparing to unleash an all-new "dedicated game platform with a brand-new concept" in early 2016 in an effort to re-establish its position in the market. Codenamed Nintendo NX, the console was first mentioned in the same breath as a partnership with Japanese game giant DeNA back in March, and that's a telling statement of intent.

Nintendo's CEO Tatsumi Kimishima predicts the NX, and the new partnership with DeNA, will lead to Nintendo's "biggest profits ever" next year, with the company even going as far as to suggest that between 10 and 12 million NX units will have shipped by the end of 2016, if recent reports are to be believed. That's an ambitious figure; but with development kits already in the hands of developers around the world, it shouldn't be long before Nintendo puts aside the Wii U, drops the gimmicky GamePad, announces a Nintendo Direct and gets its vision for the future out in front of the people.

> "Nintendo is going as far as to suggest that between 10 and 12 million NX units will have shipped by the end of 2016"



Above Nintendo is pulling out the big guns in 2016 with *Star Fox* returning on Wii U and *Zelda* following hot on its heels.

If Nintendo is legitimately able to get 10 million NX units into the wild, it would actually put it in good competition with Microsoft's underperforming Xbox One. The all-in-one entertainment system has had something of a rough ride since it was first revealed – a fact that's been discussed at length in the pages of **games™**, not to mention taken advantage of by Sony time and time again – though Xbox One is heading into 2016 in its strongest position yet. While it might not catch the PS4 anytime soon, if at all this generation, it could make a major impact in vital territories.

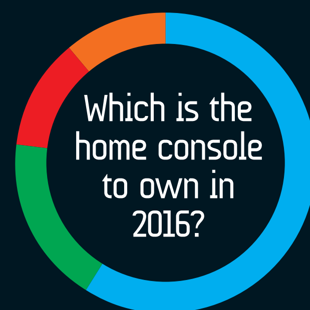
In many respects, Microsoft has done itself little favours. It's already elected to refuse the release of sales data, making it impossible to know how the Xbox One is performing on a month-by-month basis, which is never a good sign. Though that has,



Below *Street Fighter* may not have been a console seller since the SNES days, but its exclusivity on PS4 is a massive boon for Sony and will draw in fans.

Reader Reaction

→ Which home console do the **games™** readers think will be dominating in 2016?



PlayStation 4 | Wii U | Xbox One | Steam Machine

"Most likely going to be Xbone, seeing as how the trend is going. #XboxOne #newyear2016" – RadShite_Gaming

"When Steam machine is doing worse than Wii U, you know there's a problem." – SeriousBimuth

"I only vote WiiU just because of exclusives. All other consoles are multiplatform machines" – xNYxKnux

"It's got to be the PS4, Sony is absolutely killing it right now and VR is going to be great!" – RichSearle88

"Sony finally has games out that aren't Remasters, so it is PS4 all the way!" – PhazonUK

"Everyone knows PC is the way to play, but the Steam Machines are still too confusing for the general public" – xxSamTydesxx



PETER MOORE IS MOVING TO THE EA'S NEW ESPORTS GROUP, THE COMPETITIVE GAMING DIVISION

Are the Steam Machines destined to fail?

→ After a confusing introduction to the market, are the Steam Machines going to struggle to gain traction in the market?



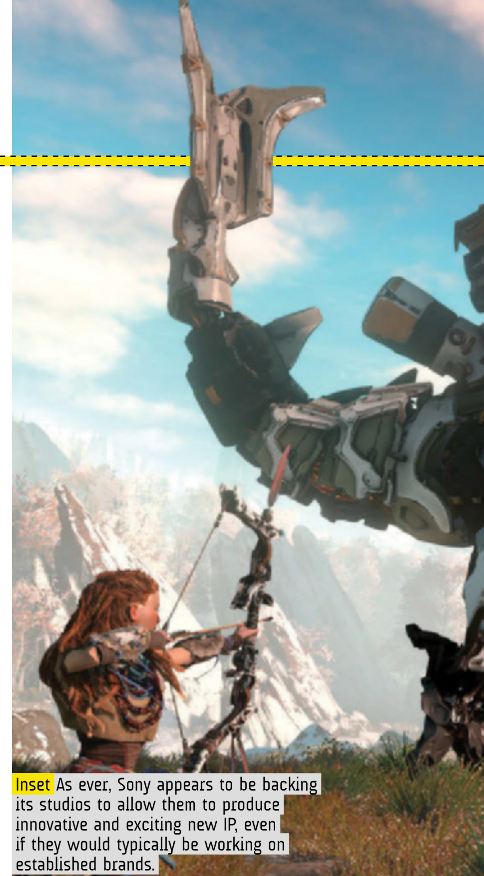
Inset While the Steam marketplace is a very competitive one and offers amazing deals for gamers, the hardware price points and differences are still things for Valve and its hardware partners to solve in the coming year.

■ THE PROBLEM WITH the Steam Machines, is that they still don't offer a clear benefit to the consumer. Valve – along with an array of hardware manufacturers – has essentially unleashed a device designed to cater to a niche within a niche. Valve has been eager to bring Steam, easily the biggest propagator of PC gaming wares, into the living room for a while now and this looked like it could be the answer. But that isn't the only element at play here; this was also Valve's chance to try and force its Linux-based Steam OS into the mainstream consciousness.

Of the 7096 games listed on the Steam store, only 1691 of them will actually function on your Steam Machine. That number will increase no doubt, but it requires developers to start actively developing their games for Linux, which isn't going to be an easy sell because of the comparatively small install base compared to PC. Combine this small library with an unappealing controller and the fact that most of these boxes – of which there is still no 'first-party standard' to compare them to from Valve – are not as versatile as a proper PC due to the lack of upgradable components. While these machines will no doubt evolve throughout the year, right now it looks like the better option for PC gaming could still just be to drag your unit next to the TV, activate Steam's Big Picture mode and play in the living room that way.



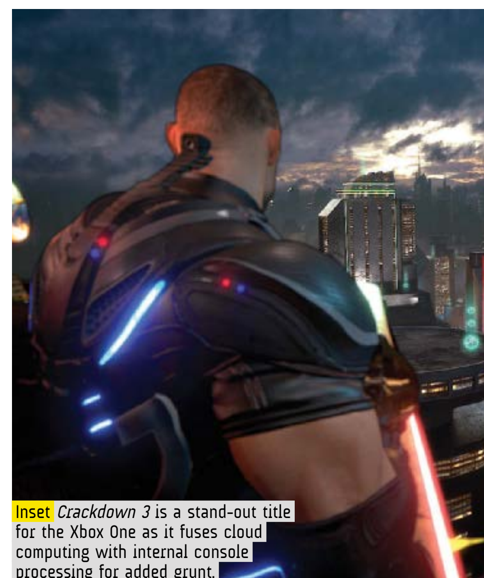




Inset As ever, Sony appears to be backing its studios to allow them to produce innovative and exciting new IP, even if they would typically be working on established brands.

on the other hand, forced the spotlight onto what it *is* doing, which is forging a fantastic environment for gamers. A redesigned dashboard, a slew of genuinely fantastic exclusives and the introduction of Xbox 360 backwards compatibility makes the Xbox One more attractive than ever. Will it be enough to regain some control of the West, where the Xbox 360 found so much success? Well, that remains to be seen.

As Sony announced its 30 million sales figures, president and global CEO of Sony



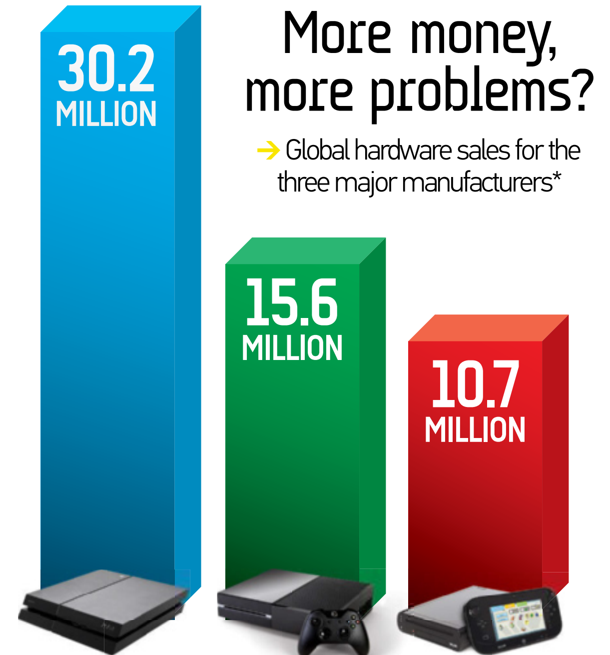
Inset *Crackdown 3* is a stand-out title for the Xbox One as it fuses cloud computing with internal console processing for added grunt.

DATA STREAM → VALVE REVEALED THAT AROUND 77,000 STEAM ACCOUNTS ARE 'HIJACKED' EACH MONTH



More money, more problems?

Global hardware sales for the three major manufacturers*



*Hardware sales estimates compiled by VG Chartz

Computer Entertainment Andrew House released a statement, claiming that the "PS4 as the best place to play since launch two years ago." If you'd have asked us earlier in the year, we might have been inclined to agree without question, but House's assertion that "PS4 continues to be the premier platform for game and interactive entertainment innovation," rings a little hollow in the face of such a strong showing from Microsoft. The Xbox One might be underpowered, but it isn't lacking in quality games and features; though it's this area Sony is likely to thrive in, come the New Year.

With *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, *Street Fighter V*, *No Man's Sky*, *The Last Guardian* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (as well as a slew of innovative indie titles) going up against the likes of *Gears Of War 4*, *Killer Instinct: Season 3*, *Scalebound*, *Quantum Break* and *Crackdown 3*, it really will be all to play for in the games space. The PS4 has excelled, even with its relatively weak exclusive games so far, and Microsoft could really struggle unless it finds a suitable system seller. NPD Group results from October have already revealed that *Halo 5: Guardians* has sold fewer Xbox consoles than any other in the main series; a terrifying reality for a company clearly banking on Master Chief coming to its rescue. If *Gears Of War* doesn't pull another, well, *Gears Of War*, Microsoft risks letting Sony take a frightening market lead in 2016.

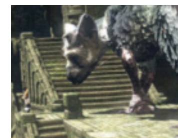
The state of play could still shift in the next 12 months. Sony is banking on PlayStation VR, Microsoft is still sinking money into its Windows 10 cross-play and HoloLens projects and, if rumours about Nintendo adopting Android as its NX OS system are true, the Japanese manufacturer could further alienate its 'core' audience as it looks to further court the casual market. And then there are the Steam machines; Valve has made a dangerous play for the living room by getting some of the biggest hardware manufacturers in the world to design and develop small (and, for the most part, affordable) tabletop PCs. We still have concerns of course: the inability to upgrade your graphics cards, the lack of a definitive 'first-party' box, and the Steam OS only supporting a handful of games on the service makes for something of a rocky launch.

It's already been two years since the Xbox One and PS4 launched in the UK, and there's a very real chance 2016 could mark the mid-point of the eighth console generation. It's very unlikely either Sony or Microsoft will let this one drag on for ten years – a theory supported somewhat by recent rumours pointing to successors already in development from both parties. The next 12 months are going to be a time of great innovation and excitement; VR will finally be a reality, the chance of slimmer consoles – thanks to the lowered cost of manufacturing parts and chipsets – is a very real possibility, and then there's the games to consider. There's never been a better time to be a gamer – regardless of what side of the console war you fell. Whether we will be able to say the same the same this time next year is anybody's guess.





Above *The Legend Of Zelda* is always a massive title for Nintendo hardware, but could this one be too little, too late for the Wii U?



Above Sony has backed a number of crowd-pleasing titles and resurrected lost favourites such as *The Last Guardian*, *Shenmue III* and *Final Fantasy VII*.



> "The PS4 has sold more than 30 million units worldwide, making it the fastest-selling Sony console in PlayStation history"

YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE INDIE HIT ROCKET LEAGUE LAND ON XBOX ONE IN FEBRUARY 2016



> "Niche products, whatever the nature, simply can't be expected to be as readily available as everyday ones"

Wanted: Dead Or Alive

Koei Tecmo's recent statement that it has no plans to release *Dead Or Alive Xtreme 3* outside of Japan came as something of a surprise, but that doesn't stop it being one of the smartest and most progressive decisions made by a major publisher in recent memory. You may not agree, and that's cool, but just hear me out on this one. There's been an influx of lewd games lately, from the strip cook-offs of *Senran Kagura: Bon Appetit!* (as well as the ninja action of the main series, of course) to the Vita-jerking nonsense of *Monster Monpiece*. These are games originally designed for an audience and a culture *significantly* different to our own here in the West – with that in mind, that they came out over here at all beggars belief but the fact that they *did* has only served to highlight this little pocket of risque business as being somewhat at odds with the shift towards equality and fair representation in modern gaming. Any cultural context they may have in their home country is lost the second they cross the border, leaving them as out of place in 2016 as a new *Carry On* movie.

Please don't think I'm waving a huge pro-censorship flag here or anything – I own and enjoy several *Senran Kagura* games, partly because they're largely played for laughs and partly because they're actually pretty good games. That might sound as ludicrous as someone telling you they read *Playboy* for the articles, but even that's not quite so unbelievable any more after the publishers moved away from nude images a few months back, another clear sign of changing attitudes in the West. But to circle back to the point, it's not that I think games like this shouldn't exist, merely that they need context and control. Koei Tecmo isn't saying it's going to alter the planned content of its game in any way, so cries of censorship are nonsense – the publisher is merely controlling its product so that it only releases in territories where it can be generally defined as 'culturally acceptable'. If you've ever found yourself in a Japanese comic or toy shop and wandered onto a floor of things you can never unsee, you should have a fair idea of what I mean by that.

Games like this can absolutely continue to exist as long as the market they are created for deems them appropriate – trying to change the entire culture of a nation or people to better fit your own moral compass has something of a history of not ending well. But niche products, whatever the nature, simply can't be expected to be as readily available as everyday ones. Want to play *DOA X3*? Import it – it's never been easier. Play it. Enjoy it. Do whatever you like. Just don't expect to be able to walk into a supermarket and buy it. You wouldn't expect that of wasabi Kit-Kats, K-pop CDs or pictures of tentacled creatures doing *terrible things* to people, so why should games be any different?



Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and genuinely plays Senran Kagura games for the gameplay. Stop laughing. It's true

Import Watch

Odin Sphere Leifthrasir

Far more than your regular HD remaster, *Leifthrasir* is a fully rebuilt version of the PS2 cult favourite – assets have been completely overhauled and remade, mechanics granted additional depth and potential and it sounds as though there'll be a lot more content in the game as well. For those who never played it back in the day, the enhanced versions of this side-scrolling action-RPG will be available for PS4, PS3 and Vita any day now…





WITHIN TWO DAYS OF LAUNCHING IN JAPAN, THE NEW MONSTER HUNTER X MANAGED TO SELL 1.5 MILLION COPIES

Hoverboard
Self Balancing Scooter

UK STORE - **UK 3 PIN PLUG** -12 MONTH WARRANTY







ALL TERRAIN



AVAILABLE IN 6 COLOURS

"We rave about game stories being great that are fairly decent by other standards, but hardly exceptional. Our quality bar is low"

Think we know how to tell a story?

As an industry and a community, we tend to be pretty introspective. It's a good/bad thing – gamers are extremely media-literate compared to fans of other media, but the flip-side can be that our references are often quite limited: other games, or media that presents basically the same content as most games. So, as it's a good opportunity for an end-of-year/beginning-of-year type of thing, let's not just talk about games. Let's talk about what other mediums are doing that we could learn from.

On TV, the highlight of the year splits between the UK and the US. Over here, the BBC just nailed it with *Doctor Foster*, a drama written by Mike Bartlett and starring Suranne Jones. On the surface it was a simple story – a woman discovering about her husband's affair - but with a tension and depth that's rare even for television. Over on Netflix, anyone who even vaguely cares about writing or acting needs to watch *Bloodlines*, which is basically the best TV I've seen in years – again, using the subtle interplay of family dynamics as the cornerstone of the action.

Both of these TV shows throw into sharp relief just how far ahead the quality bar of TV acting and writing is from games. We've improved a lot over the last couple of years, but we're producing nothing as an industry that even comes close to shows like this, and it's good to have that thrown in your face from time to time to recalibrate our expectations.

I just finished off *The Last Policeman* trilogy by Ben H. Winters, and in a world full of cheesy post-apocalypses, it's a brave, tough and weirdly uplifting set of books that doesn't descend into heroics or easy conclusions. I know I'm working on a new game concept when I start obsessively reading, and I ploughed through the entire back catalogue of Iain M. Banks this year – and if there's anyone out there who hasn't read *Excession* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* but is interested in sci-fi games, go consume. Banks was the master, and his work gives you renewed excitement and appreciation for *Mass Effect*, whilst also showing you the games that *Elite* and *Destiny* could have been (both great games, btw, but you've always gotta look for the next step up).

Movies… hmmm. I've got pretty low-brow taste in movies. *The Martian* nailed good-ol'-fashioned blockbuster squarely, *Ex Machina* was fantastic and *Mad Max* was like unwrapping all your Christmas presents at once to find out someone had crapped in the boxes. The shift of real quality from film to TV over the last couple of years is really interesting as a counterpoint to us in gaming, particularly with the success of *Life Is Strange*, as between Dontnod and Telltale we've got proper episodic success stories now.

We rave about game stories being great that are *fairly* decent by other standards, but hardly *exceptional*. Our quality bar is low. Games are still massively misunderstood, if recognised at all, and that's frustrating. Personally I don't need to see any more novels or TV about games until they get better at it. Interestingly, films are officially less good at action than games are; I think we've crossed a threshold, which is really fascinating. If I want action blockbuster, I'm reaching for the console, not going to a movie theatre. Movies trying to ape the octane of game action lack the sense of agency we take for granted, yet they do it at the expense of script, character and acting – the things we've been traditionally bad at, meaning they are taking the least interesting bits of each medium. So I guess there's an opportunity for games here, and that's my hope for 2016: that we continue to raise our expectations of these traditionally bad bits of games, driving up the quality of those to a point where we can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with non-interactive media and say "We can do everything you can, but we can also do this…" whilst continuing to increase our confidence as a medium and celebrate the fact we work in the most exciting art-form on this pale blue dot.

■ Most triple-A games now offer action far superior to anything you could see in the most expensive summer blockbusters at the cinema.





Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games**™



SYSTEM SHOCK 3 HAS BEEN CONFIRMED TO BE IN DEVELOPMENT BY INDIE TEAM OTHERSIDE ENTERTAINMENT

“When [Gearbox] told me they were basically making a combination of Quake and Diablo, I nearly lost my mind”

STEVE GIBSON, VICE PRESIDENT, GEARBOX STUDIOS



WHY I ...

DIABLO

STEVE GIBSON, VICE PRESIDENT, GEARBOX STUDIOS

"*Super Metroid*, *as a kid, changed my life. My neighbour had an NES and my mum made me promise that I'd do all my homework and get a good test score and then I'd get an NES and* Super Metroid. *Thing is, by that time, I'd already beaten the game at my neighbour's house, but I wasn't gonna tell her that part!*

But what happened in-between was Diablo. *That was a life-changer for me – that feeling and that game, oh man. I came to Gearbox in 2008 –* Borderlands *wasn't out yet – and when the studio told me they were basically making a combination of* Quake *and* Diablo, *I nearly lost my mind. These were the games that changed my life and here they are – in one game: the RPG and loot elements of* Diablo, *you've got a shooter which I frickin' love from* DOOM, *and I guess you've even got the adventure element from* Super Metroid. *'This is the world I want to be in', I said to myself – 'My entire path of growing up has led me here, this is amazing.'*" 





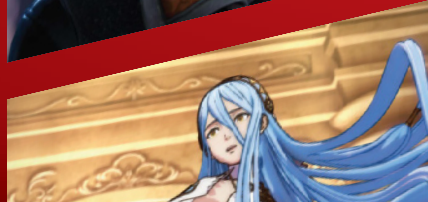





2016 MOST WANTED

NEW GAMES, NEW HARDWARE AND NEW IDEAS DOMINATE ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING YEARS IN GAMING EVER!









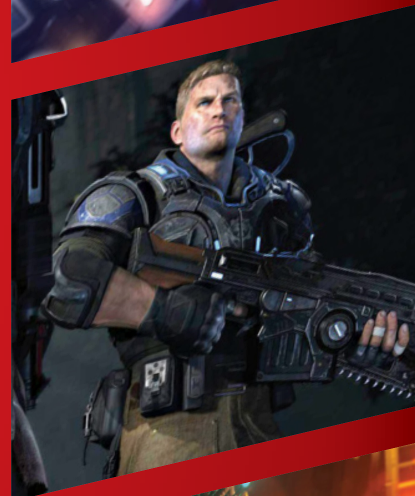




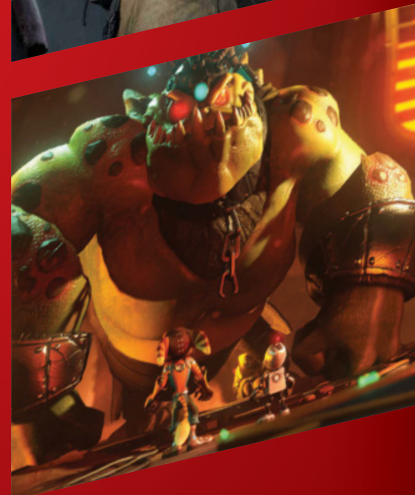








ZOTAC





WHY YOU'LL FIND DARK SOULS III IS TOUGHER THAN EVER

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Namco Bandai Games **Developer:** From Software **Release:** April 2016 **Players:** 1

We test ourselves against From Software's brutal game-changer to see just how much more of a challenge it offers on a new generation of hardware

"DARK SOULS III FEELS LIKE A WORTHY SUCCESSOR TO SCHOLAR OF THE FIRST SIN"

In the face of being continuously humiliated from an interactive experience, there are two very natural reactions that tend to be displayed by any reasonable gamer: hubris or hostility. *Dark Souls*, so unrelenting in its effort to totally break players down into quivering pools of blood and sweat, morosely thrives on both. Strut into battle with excessive confidence; you'll likely to be staring down a 'You Died' respawn screen with a sigh and a shrug. Wade into altercations with aggression clouding your judgment; you'll soon be scrolling through Amazon looking for cheap replacement controllers. Don't blame anyone but yourself before you run crying to Twitter though – this is what happens when you trust game director Hidetaka Miyazaki with your time.

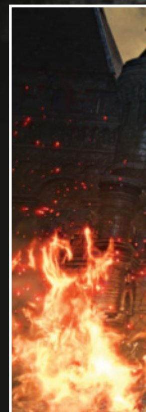
And millions continue to do exactly that: hand their cash over feverishly to the gentleman that would famously laugh in the face of any press or enthusiasts that dared admit *Souls*' crushing brand of difficulty too hostile to handle. But it's that unrepentant attitude that makes *Dark Souls III* so alluring in today's apologetic market. The next-gen only sequel is a beautifully bleak celebration of everything From Software has achieved since *Demon's Souls* first tormented gamers back in 2009. *Dark Souls III* might be more of the same, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing; we've sunk hours into an early build on PlayStation 4 and crawled away largely impressed.

THE MOST PLAYABLE ENTRY YET

We get the sense that *Dark Souls III* is the most accessible entry to the franchise so far – but don't confuse accessibility with simplicity. *Dark Souls III* isn't going to hold your hand through the darkness; impossibly large monsters will still rip you to shreds in seconds, and dragons still have a tendency to swoop in unannounced and cover *everything* in flickering fire. Buried deeply beneath the alluringly bleak gothic architectural design, hiding behind the legions of warped, ghoulish figures that adorn The Wall Of Lodoleth is the fastest, most satisfying *Dark Souls* combat yet.

Bloodborne players will feel right at home, while *Dark Souls* players might feel like their poor warrior avatar has taken to dealing with their inherent gluttony for punishment with an injection of adrenaline straight to the heart. You move with purpose and speed, with sword swipes cutting much quicker and harsher than before. It adds a sense of urgency to the pace of combat that was missing from *Dark Souls II*; in fact, it's more difficult than ever to back out and away from encounters – it's almost as if From Software is daring you to try and sneak in another jab, goading you to stay within the razor's edge of death for another second before attempting a roll to safety.

A slick new combat mechanic supports this fresh mentality, dubbed Battle Arts, which seeks to imbue the player with an array of new offensive manoeuvres. These, again, come directly influenced from Miyazaki's time working on *Bloodborne* – they could be seen as a rough interpretation of the combo trick weapons. Each type now has a unique, limited use special attack function that is activated with L2. This then alters the function of your regular attack; a long sword will see your character bend a knee and prepare to unleash devastating heavy guard breaks, while a great sword can launch enemies helplessly into the air. This in itself has changed the basic structure of a *Dark Souls* encounter. It means that you need to make a decision between carrying





■ ABOVE *Dark Souls III* is without question the best looking entry into the series so far. Fire and particle effects are particularly impressive, though we hope the frame-rate is improved before release.

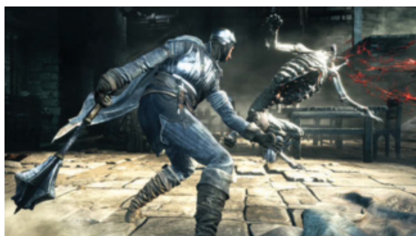
a shield capable of parrying in your left hand or sacrificing it for the ability to use Battle Arts – powerful attacks that will cut tough enemies down quickly but leave you incredibly vulnerable if you mistakenly mistime them.

Even at this early stage in development Battle Arts seem well implemented. A blue magic meter now sits between the health and stamina bars – no doubt a throwback to *Demon's Souls*' UI arrangement – that governs the use of both Battle Arts and the overhauled spell system. Worry not, there's no Spice gathering necessary here; restoring MP is as simple as downing an all-new blue Estus flask or by returning to one of the sparsely located Bonfires located out in the world. The result of these new systems and mechanics is a game that feels fresh but familiar; rich in options but similar in scope to what's come before.

Of course, by handing you an array of new potentially power balance-shifting attacks, enemy A.I. and behaviour have also been handed something of an overhaul. The withered ghouls seem eager to draw you out – inviting you to rush in foolishly – which ultimately makes *Dark Souls III* more aggressive. The heightened pace and ferocity of combat might seem like a concession to the casual market when fighting enemies one on one, but you'll soon learn that it's a carefully-designed ruse. Like in *Bloodborne*, enemies have a tendency to attack in groups – and you can forget about rolling behind enemies effortlessly for massive critical strikes – which conspires to create a viciously violent experience.

If you're worried that this is all sounding a little too much like *Bloodborne 2.0* for your liking, when what you're after is more *Dark Souls*, don't worry. *Dark Souls III* still feels like a worthy successor to *Scholar Of The First Sin*. You won't, for example, find yourself able to hack through sections with purpose – nor will you gain health back by casually swiping at enemies – as always, you're only a few moments from death. If anything, *Dark Souls III* has heightened the tension by ensuring enemies are hiding around every corner, lurking in every shadow, and it's terrifying. *Dark Souls III* is being built for the players that like to take things slow and cautiously, for those that ponder each and every move before it's even been made; if you even try to panic-run through an area you'll quickly find a train of monstrous death on your heels. »





WORLDWIDE SALES FIGURES FOR THE SOULS SERIES

Breaking down a modern success story

DARK SOULS



TOTAL SALES 8.5 MILLION

PREPARE TO DIE EDITION





DARK SOULS II

SCHOLAR OF THE FIRST SIN



0.6 MILLION

» IS IT TAKING FULL ADVANTAGE OF NEXT-GEN TECHNOLOGY?

There's a terrible beauty to *Dark Souls III*'s visual design. Quite honestly, you haven't quite seen a From Software game like this. The Wall Of Lodoleth sees towering gothic structures stretch off into the distance – each and every one can be reached and explored – while ash and fire flicker in the air. *Souls* fans will find it eerily reminiscent to the thematic presence of Anor Londo, blended coolly with the aesthetic design of *Dark Souls*' Undead Burg – which should come as no surprise, Miyazaki has stated time and time again that the 2016 entry will bring about an end to the *Dark Souls* universe as we know it.

The scope is staggering, as are some of the little graphical flourishes (even if the overall quality of textures leaves a lot to be desired). From Software is going big with physics-based simulation in *Dark Souls III*, meaning you'll catch rare glimpses of flags fluttering in the wind in the distance, or become mesmerised by how the rags draped over your warrior react to movement and combat. The effect was used sparingly in *Dark Souls II* (most notably in the Majula hub) but its presence here really helps bring the world to life, making it feel less like a place fixed in time, and more like an interactive entity conspiring to punish you.

Of course, all of this comes at a price. While From Software has never been a studio known for its remarkable graphics, *Dark Souls III* will require plenty of optimising before it launches in April 2016. While the *Dark Souls II* remaster set a 60fps target, which was appreciated, it seems the sequel has abandoned such a thing – with our demo running at 30fps with v-sync. This creates a strange situation where the gameplay feels like it's taking a step forward, but the performance is taking two back. While the framerate held up for the most part, it did have a tendency to stutter during sub and main boss battles.

We're at something of a crossroads with *Dark Souls* now. With the PC version of *Dark Souls II* and PS4 exclusive *Bloodborne* proving that From



Software has the talent and capacity to make an attractive game, it's a little disappointing to see so many compromises on the console edition of *Dark Souls III*. Of course, there's a strong chance this could change before the game launches, but we've learned to keep our expectations in check when it comes to From Software in this regard.

DOES DARK SOULS HATE YOU? YES

The secret to success here – as it is in every *Dark Souls* – is to quickly understand that the game simply doesn't respect you. Once you realise From Software wants you fuming, that your attempts to beat the game without crying is futile, and that it will very rarely take pity on your miserable existence, then you can get straight down to business.

Caution, a steady hand, and sharp tenacity are the clear routes to victory in *Dark Souls III*. Like every release in the series so far, the game is purposefully unhelpful in detailing its systems and mechanics – it thrives on being obtuse at the most inopportune moments imaginable – but once you wrap your head around the basics, it isn't as soul-crushing as it makes itself out to be – though that's largely true of every release put out by From Software. Perhaps we are finally indoctrinated to the studio's way of thinking, or perhaps the studio just realises that a little leeway in the early game isn't the worst thing in the world.

Dark Souls isn't designed to be fun; at least, it doesn't feel like it half the time. It's a stressful, impossibly cruel franchise that thrives on misery, and the third game is no exception. The world perfectly mirrors the sensibility of its players after just a few hours – tinged in hopelessness – and it's a wickedly fresh type of experience for the players bored of the familiar annual releases. The combat is more engaging than ever, the silence is staggering – often only pierced by howling enemies or sharp orchestral crescendos – and the lore is still hidden behind vague mysteries perceived as storytelling mastery. Still, *Dark Souls III* feels perfectly placed to delight its fans and even – dare we say it – make it a little more accessible to a new audience that might have been too afraid to even consider purchasing it before.



LEFT Our demo ended with a climactic boss fight against the Dancer of the Frigid Valley, a difficult fight that adapted to the pace of battle as we chipped away at the health bar.



LEFT Summoning and Invasions will be making a return, giving players an opportunity to reap big rewards by assisting and hindering other players during the course of your adventure.





MAKING SPELL CASTING MORE VIABLE

Detailing the changes to Dark Souls' magic systems

From Software is making a few important changes to the way magic is utilised in *Dark Souls III*, changes that should make spell casters a little more viable – a welcomed move after the hefty nerfs made to magic users in *Dark Souls II: Scholar Of The First Sin*'s post-launch patches.

The Academy Assassin will be your focused offensive spell caster and comes equipped with three magic attacks in the form of Soul Arrow, which fires powerful bolts of energy; Soul Greatsword, which summons a ghostly sword; and Soul Dart, a fast to cast but low damage projectile. These are cast with L1, with L2 giving you the opportunity to charge the attack and utilise one of the new Battle Art combat variations.

The Herald Of White, on the other hand, is the revised Miracle user in *Dark Souls III*. This character is focused heavily on using defensive buffs: Heal, which restores hit points in a tough spot, is perfectly complemented with Sacred Oath, a spell that buffs your offensive and defensive capabilities. Miracle users will also have access to attacks like Lightning Spear, an electricity-based attack that lets you keep range while dealing incremental damage. Again, Miracle users have access to Battle Arts, which will give you more options and tactics in battle.

Dark Souls has often struggled to balance magic users, though the third entry seems to be striking the right balance between vulnerability and offensive capabilities. From Software will continue to tweak Miracles and offensive spells over the course of the next few months in an effort to avoid a post-launch patch messing with your already established builds.

> "FROM SOFTWARE HAS NEVER BEEN A STUDIO KNOWN FOR ITS REMARKABLE GRAPHICS; DARK SOULS III WILL REQUIRE PLENTY OF OPTIMISING BEFORE IT LAUNCHES IN MAY 2016"



LEFT It's clear From Software has learned a lot from *Bloodborne*, with *Dark Souls III* taking on its faster approach to combat and introducing more vicious mobs of enemies to terrorise players.



WIELD REAL POWER WITH CRACKDOWN 3

Format: Xbox One **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** Reagent Games **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

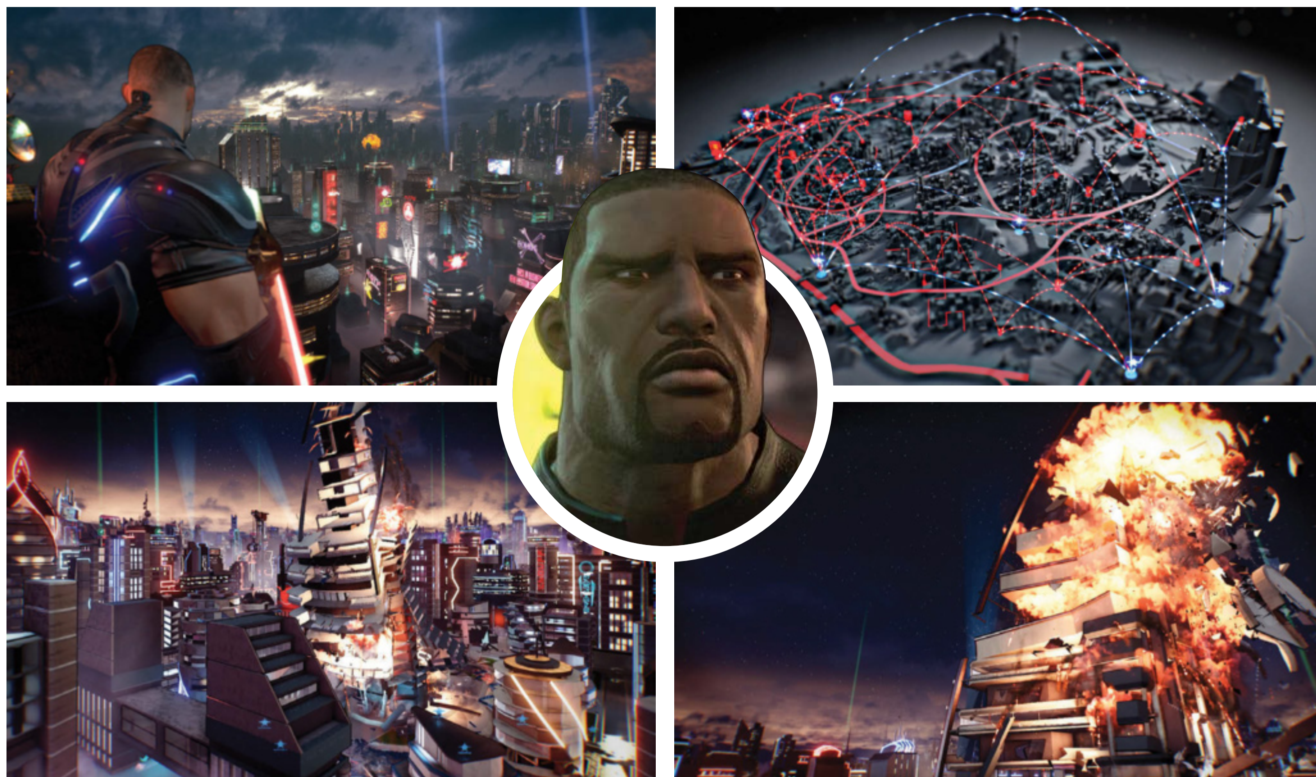
Have you ever wanted to level an entire city? This Xbox One exclusive will let you do just that

Crackdown doesn't care what you can do with a gun in your hands; it's more concerned with the opportunities you can create with destruction. Set in a dense, futuristic metropolis, *Crackdown* sees *Grand Theft Auto* creator Dave Jones return to the franchise, and he's leveraging a truly unbelievable amount of power out of the Xbox One for this console exclusive. Simply put, *Crackdown* will be delivering the classic gameplay in a brand new way.

Crackdown is, in many ways, a game of two halves. The campaign looks like a faithful return to the spirit of the original; a strong focus on verticality, bolstering the prowess of your super cop with Orbs, and finding fun through fostering frantic bouts of insane destruction to complete your objectives, are at the heart of the experience. The multiplayer, on the other hand, is aiming to completely blow up the way we play and enjoy games today.

Crackdown's campaign will feature four-player co-operative play and light destructibility, of course, but the real fun will come from an online-only multiplayer mode that takes the well-oiled *Crackdown* formula and expands it across a 100 per cent destructible environment. There's a vast and entangled criminal hierarchy to be dismantled, and thanks to the power of Microsoft's Azure Cloud servers, you'll be able to do it any way you see fit.

We haven't seen this level of unscripted, real-time destruction before in a videogame. This is because most titles have been limited by processing power and memory, though *Crackdown* avoids this by leveraging the power of Xbox One's cloud computing capabilities – essentially letting you play with 20 times the computational power of the system to foster unrelenting mayhem. We've seen it in action and it's truly impressive. Everything you do has a weight and impact on the world, and it isn't long before toppling buildings create chain reactions and debris literally litters the entire game world. One of the best aspects of the original *Crackdown* games was seeing how creative players got with bending and breaking the game world, and we struggle to even imagine what players will do when this arrives in late 2016.



PURE POWER

Collecting Orbs was always fun in *Crackdown*, but the ability-warping collectibles will have a new sense of importance this time around. With players able to essentially tear through anything in the environment, it'll be a race between you and your friends to get powered up and ready to go as soon as *Crackdown* lands.

FRANCHISE REBOOT

Forget everything you know about *Crackdown*. While this is technically the third instalment in the franchise, Reagent Games is treating this as a spiritual successor to the original release. The basic concept remains the same, but everything from the size of the world, ferocity of combat and scope of gameplay is increasing dramatically.

GET CONNECTED

We have no idea how Reagent Games plans on keeping the multiplayer side of *Crackdown* engaging after you level the entire city the first time, but it's already clear that the always online portion of the game is where a lot of the attention, budget and focus is. Still, we expect a fully-fledged campaign as well.

MULTI-STUDIO DEVELOPMENT

The new hugely ambitious *Crackdown* is being made possible thanks to a collaboration between three different studios. Reagent Games (with additional assistance from Sumo Digital) is handling the gameplay and art assets, while Cloudgine is working on the core engine and working to integrate the game fully with Microsoft's Cloud based servers.

TIME TO HUNT?

■ The open world is validated by a set of real-time mechanics that make the whole thing feel real – from a day/night cycle that will affect which enemies are available to hunt to dynamic weather conditions that can help or hinder your activities, pretty much every quest you do will have some degree of unpredictability to it, preventing *Assassin's Creed*-style 'cookie cutter' missions.

BOWS ARE STILL COOL

■ The main character is Aloy – a name we assume is taken from 'alloy' due to her relationship with machines. She's a ruthless hunter, and a savvy explorer, able to use tripwires, arrows, explosives and melee skills in combat. Her most natural skills lie in her archery, though, so expect a lot of mid-range combat and dodge rolls, a la the *Souls* games.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

■ *Horizon: Zero Dawn* wants to focus on the juxtaposition between the beauty and danger of the world – looking at how those themes can't really exist independent of each other. The game wants to emphasize this nascent beauty through exploration, open-ended quests and a light crafting system that makes you really pay attention to where you're going. Better yet, the whole thing comes together *without* loading screens.

JURASSIC PARTS

■ Set 1,000 years in the future, there isn't much left of the world as we understand it. Instead, machinated monstrosities roam free, set on their own evolutionary path since the decline of man. You can harvest the body parts of these great beasts and use them for your own ends... but be careful – *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is set in a time where humanity *isn't* at the top of the food chain.

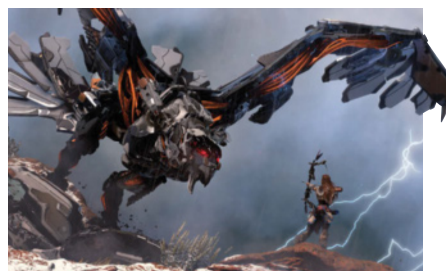
WHY **HORIZON** IS THE PS4 RPG TO WATCH

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Netherlands **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Guerilla Games **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1

Time to get excited for the dawn of the cyber-dinosaurs

There were 40 concepts that Guerilla Games pitched after the release of *Killzone 3*. 40. Of all of them, *Horizon*'s director Mathis de Jonge stated that *Horizon: Zero Dawn* was the most risky, so like any team of creatives, the developers at Guerilla Games leapt at the idea. After the decision was made to stick with *Zero Dawn*, Guerilla hired John Gonzalez (a writer of *Fallout: New Vegas* fame) and wrote a further 20 stories exploring multiple facets of the game's world, zoning in on various player characters each time... only one of them stuck, though, and that was Aloy. This is her story, this is her world.





“TO EARN THE TRUST OF THE ANIMALS, YOU MUST SATIATE THE WHIMS OF THE GODS”

WILD'S LAND BEFORE TIME

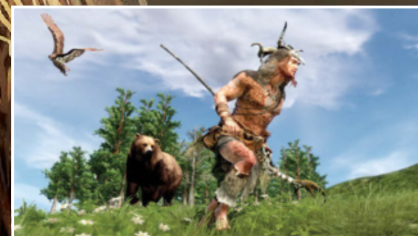
Format: PS4 **Origin:** France **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Wild Sheep Studio **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

Go 6000 Years Into The Past With Michel Ancel's latest



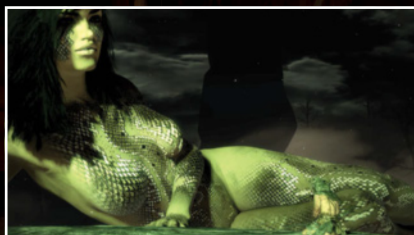
YOU CAN RIDE A BEAR (AND SHOUT LIKE ONE, TOO)

We're starting with the important things with *Wild*: bear riding. It's a game about animal husbandry, respecting nature and the animals around you enough that they're willing to help you – a mystical shaman – provide security and nourishment for your tribe. To that end, you can enlist the help of a bear (by bellowing at one) to help defend you, or move you from place to place.



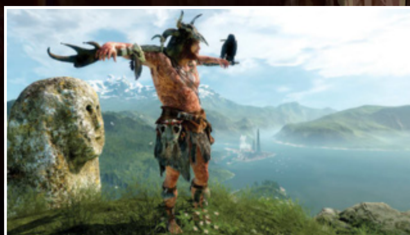
...BUT YOU'LL ALSO GET KILLED BY THEM

Michel Ancel demoed the game back at Paris Games Week, and as he mounted the bear to an audience of cheering ursine-enthusiasts, he grinned and said 'for hours and hours at the beginning of the game, you will be *killed* by bears'. It feeds into the idea of building up relationships with these animals – you can't use their innate power until they trust you.



YOU CAN COMMUNICATE DIRECTLY WITH ANCIENT SPIRITS

To earn the trust of the animals you want to channel, you must first satiate the whims of the ancient gods that lord it over that genus of creature. The only one we've seen so far is a snake goddess – scales mixed with skin – lounging in a dank pool in a swamp. We're excited to see how *Wild* deals with other animals – bears, eagles, foxes, tigers – the list is practically endless.



IT'S THE FIRST TRUE NEOLITHIC SIMULATOR

We've wracked our brains to think of another game set in the Neolithic period (between 6000 and 5000BC) but we can't think of one. Making a world in that style threw up its own challenges to the newly established Wild Sheep Studio, but using a mix of procedurally generated assets with artisanal, handmade flourishes, Wild Sheep managed to make the world feel as authentic as it could.



YOU'VE GOT TO RESPECT YOUR SURROUNDINGS

If you go barrelling into an enemy camp and make a ton of noise as you wreak havoc on the settlers there, you're going to attract a lot of attention. And it's not good attention; wolves, bears and who knows what else lives in the wild, and in a world where humans lack the means to defend themselves properly, that's dangerous, especially if Ancel's quote stating 'there are endless ways to die' is actually based in truth...

2016 MOST WANTED

> "ALL EYES ARE ON THE COALITION TO PROVE THAT IT HAS WHAT IT TAKES"

CAN **GEARS OF WAR 4** SUCCEED WHERE 343 FALTERED?

Format: Xbox One **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** The Coalition **Release:** TBC 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

Is The Coalition up to the challenge of bearing the Microsoft franchise burden?

Is The Coalition really up to the task of giving *Gears Of War* a new lease on life? It shouldn't be a question we need to ask; but if one thing has become abundantly clear from Microsoft's other attempt to hand an important franchise off to a new studio, it's that it doesn't work smoothly. 343 Industries' handling of *Halo* over the last five years has been uneven to say the least, and now all eyes are on The Coalition to prove that it has what it takes to re-establish *Gears Of War* as one of the best third-person shooters in the business. *Gears Of War 4* will be an important release – for both studio and console – and so long as The Coalition is mindful of *Gears'* integral working parts, we can see the franchise's return faring much better than Master Chief's woeful adventures.

UNDERSTANDING THE CORE APPEAL

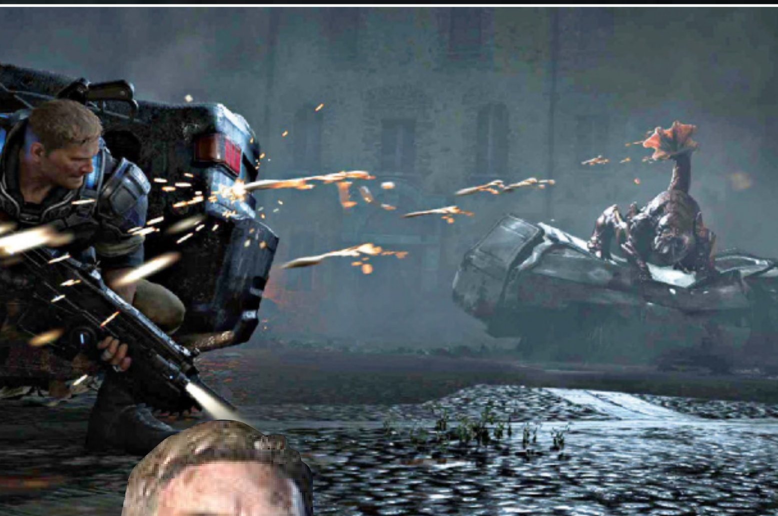
In many respects, it's deliriously easy to understand and appreciate the core appeal of *Gears Of War*. It's a power fantasy that puts you in control of the end of the world; letting you wield some of the deadliest weapons ever conceived against an array of alien foes with little to no motive behind their actions. Does it make for a weak narrative drive? It sure does; but *Gears* has always held action closer to its heart than anything else. The Coalition would do well to remember this as it tries to re-build the universe away from Epic's leadership.

GRAPHICAL GAME CHANGER

Gears Of War might have begun life as little more than a showcase for Epic's Unreal Engine 3, but it quickly became a system seller for the Xbox 360. Coalition will need to embrace the relatively untested Unreal Engine 4 quickly, but not only that; it'll need to prove that the Xbox One has the power to stand shoulder to shoulder with the graphical powerhouses found on PC and PS4 with *Gears Of War 4*. The reveal demo didn't do a great job with this; the majority of it was shrouded in darkness.

LEARNING FROM JUDGEMENT

Gears Of War Judgement failed for a number of reasons, but Coalition would do well to heed the lessons learned here. Its strange structure and oddly introduced challenges didn't resonate with gamers, perhaps indicating that *Gears* fans are happy with the fairly linear and atmospheric adventures pioneered by Epic. With *Gears'* original producer, Rod Fergusson, back on board for *Gears Of War 4*, we expect he will steer the ship in the right direction – even if Marcus and the rest of Delta team are nowhere to be found.





■ ABOVE: While The Coalition is largely a new team to the *Gears* series, the presence of Rod Fergusson should provide some continuity.

EXPAND ON THE SIMPLICITY

■ We're excited to see where The Coalition takes *Gears Of War 4*, but it's impossible to overstate just how important the core mechanics and systems are to Gears' success. As simple as they may be, the weighty cover system, Roadie Running and Active Reload system are integral to making it *feel* like *Gears*. It's these core areas where the imitators – and People Can Fly's *Judgement* – failed to capture the magic of the franchise. It's now up to Coalition to prove it isn't just another imitator, and is worthy of the *Gears* branding.

FROM ALIEN TO HALO WARS 2

Format: Xbox One, PC **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** The Creative Assembly **Release:** 2016 **Players:** TBC

The creator of Total War takes on its toughest challenge yet

It's hard to believe, but we are actually getting another *Halo Wars*. While the 2009 release was well received critically – proving that the RTS genre could indeed find success on console – there was still a lot of work to be done. With Ensemble Studios now dead and buried, development duties now fall to The Creative Assembly; the franchise is in safe hands, basically.

We've been a little concerned that *Halo Wars 2* would turn out to be *Total War: Halo*, though that doesn't seem to be the case. While Creative Assembly is consulting with its *Total War* team, not to mention 343 Industries, for help along the way, *Halo Wars 2* is actually being developed by a team formed in the aftermath of *Alien: Isolation*. That means you should expect *Halo Wars 2* to carry the polish and graphical excellence of 2014's superb survival horror game, with the technical proficiency and genre know-how born from Creative Assembly's long legacy of creating strategy games.

While *Halo Wars* was always well regarded due to its clever integration of the gamepad with the hectic RTS action, the sequel will also be landing on Windows 10 – meaning full mouse & keyboard support for Xbox One could also be on the near horizon. Will *Halo Wars 2* be worth the wait? That remains to be seen, but it'll be up to Creative Assembly to dispel the notion that RTS games don't work on console, just as Ensemble Studios had to do six years ago.





While it remains unconfirmed, it seems likely that **Halo Wars 2** will promote cross-platform multiplayer gaming between Xbox One and Windows 10.

10 THINGS TO EXPECT FROM THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

Format: Wii U **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo EPD **Release:** TBC 2016 **Players:** 1

Key facts you need to know about Link's newest adventure

THIS IS A PROPER OPEN WORLD

1 Inspired by the original concept of *The Legend Of Zelda*, celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, the Wii U *Zelda* will be a completely free open world with no limits on where you can go and what you can visit from the start of the game.

PUZZLES GO WORLDWIDE

2 Nintendo has expressed its perspective that the open world sandbox design of this game essentially complements the puzzle-solving aspect of the series. Simply knowing your destination is just the beginning. You also need to solve how to get there.

TALKING ABOUT THE WEATHER

3 Perhaps a subtle element of the reveals so far, but one we enjoy a great deal, is the swaying foliage you can see in trailers so far. It suggests a full dynamic weather system that the world fully responds to, a little like *The Witcher III* enjoyed.

LIFE IN THE WILD

4 The days of NPCs only being about in villages and outposts are gone as this *Zelda* appears to have locals out in the fields working and hanging around away from community gatherings. Not to mention we can expect a lot more wildlife roaming freely too.

A WORLD OF RUINS

5 *Zelda* games have tended to do a great job of selling the idea that a world existed before the events of the game, packed full of history and this one is no different. Trailers and screens so far have shown plenty of ruins and old structures hinting at past civilisations.

CLASSIC LOCATIONS

6 While the time period and occasionally the world of the *Zelda* series has changed with each game, certain locations do get repeated; in the deep background of landscape shots you can see what appears to be a returning Death Mountain setting.

A REACTIVE WORLD

7 This isn't just a pretty but lifeless landscape packed with detail; it's one packed with reactive AI that could hint at your actions really impacting the world. Animals will react to combat by fleeing, or dash away if danger approaches, creating a good environmental clue of a threat approaching.

DESTRUCTIBLE ENVIRONMENTS

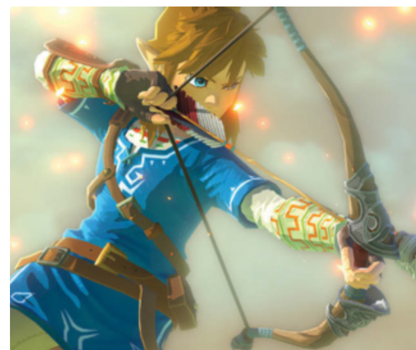
8 It's not clear how destructible the new *Zelda* will be, but what we've seen so far shows larger monsters smashing through stone walls and creating a lot of debris pretty easily, as well as scorching grass and the potential for spreading fires. All very exciting.

MASTER OF THE BOW

9 Link has always been associated with the Master Sword, the world being a dangerous one to explore without it, but what we've seen so far suggests he's at least as comfortable with a bow this time, preparing two arrows with ease even on horseback.

HORSE COMBOS

10 Your horse in the new *Zelda* looks to be incredibly important, not just as a means of transport, but also for carrying items in saddlebags, carrying camping equipment and for helping with attacks. We've already seen it launch Link into the air to strike at an enemy.



FELINE FRIEND

The primary influence for Fumito Ueda, director of *The Last Guardian*, as he created Trico was the movement and physic of a cat. He even went so far as to buy himself a new pet cat in order to observe it and get more ideas for his new creation.

CANINE INSTINCTS

While a cat is the primary influence on the look of Trico, there's more of a canine temperament to the creature from what we can tell. Trico's more obedient and receptive to instruction than we would expect from the typically indifferent cats of the world.

THE MAKING OF THE **LAST GUARDIAN'S** TRICO

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** genDesign, SCE Japan Studio **Release:** TBC 2016 **Players:** 1

Ueda's hunt for the perfect gaming companion

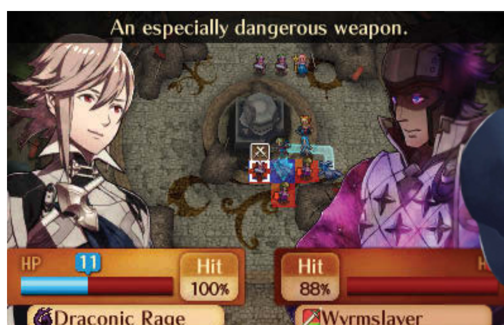
BIRD OF PREY

Rounding off the general griffin look of Trico, we have the feathers and legs of the mysterious creature. This has a couple of key benefits. One, feathers offer some interesting grabbing mechanics. What if they fall out? Plus, the claws give Trico more grabbing strength of its own.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

We've come to know the creature as Trico, derived by Tri, meaning three and 'Ico', being the first game in this loosely related series. However the Japanese name, Toriko is a combination of Tori (bird) and Neko (Cat). Toriko is also the Japanese word for prisoner, giving more clues as to its background.







THE TACTICAL ROLEPLAYING MASTER RETURNS WITH **FIRE EMBLEM FATES**

Format: 3DS **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Intelligent Systems, Nintendo SPD **Release:** TBC 2016 (Japan: Out now/US: 16 Feb) **Players:** 1-2

Five things to expect from this localised release

A BETTER STORY

1 Intelligent systems took to heart criticism of the narrative in *Fire Emblem Awakenings*, not least because it's a game that saved the series in spite of its failings. Manga and anime writer Shin Kibayashi penned all three plotlines for this game.

THREE PATHS TO GLORY

2 As the player-created heir to the royal family of Hoshido you can choose to defend your home in the oncoming war in *Birthright* or side with your adopted home Nohr in *Conquest*. Alternatively you can pick a third path, *Revelation*, which sees you reject both kingdoms.

THEY'RE SEPARATE RELEASES

3 Be aware that *Birthright* and *Conquest* are two different versions of *Fire Emblem Fates*, not unlike releases of the *Pokémon* series. The alternate story paths can be downloaded as DLC to either version at a reduced price.

IT'S A JOINT EFFORT

4 As with previous titles the development team behind *Fire Emblem Fates* is peppered with senior staff from both Intelligent Systems and Nintendo, each offering their particular expertise. It's clearly a relationship that works, because the games are rarely poor.

IT'S GOT MULTIPLAYER

5 An element of the game that was not spoken of much before release and surprised some players was the inclusion of 5v5 multiplayer battles both locally and online against friends and random players. It's a whole new way to enjoy *Fire Emblem*.

"TAKE DOWN ANOTHER TEAM, GET OUT OF THERE WITH THE EXTRA LOOT, AND YOU'VE EARNED A NICE REWARD FOR BEING A BASTARD"

THE DIVISION MIGHT BE THIS YEAR'S DESTINY

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Sweden **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Massive **Release:** 8 March 2016 **Players:** Massively multiplayer

Can Ubisoft overcome its problem with perception to create a multiplayer masterpiece?

This is where it could all fall apart for Ubisoft; crumbling faster than modern society on one fateful, purely-hypothetical Black Friday in NYC. The publisher has been under massive scrutiny since the turn of the eighth console generation – PR mishaps, barely-optimised games seeing release, and numerous delays will do that to a reputation – but it's perhaps *The Division* that has collected the most trepidation from the gaming community at large. It's a curious state of affairs. While **games™** is as guilty as any of you for spending (see also: wasting) copious amounts of hours bemoaning the creation and application of *that* 'Ubisoft open world game template' (you know the one we're on about) for everything from *Assassin's Creed* to *Far Cry* and even, yes, *The Crew*; *The Division* looks like it might finally be, dare we say it, something of a fresh dose of excitement in an overcrowded action genre.

But still, even we print that praise with a sense of trepidation. With the multi-platform beta delayed until "early 2016" and the Xbox One Alpha test subject to a very strict NDA – which may very well condemn your first-born to QA testing *Just Dance* until the day they die should you leak so much as a screenshot – it means we will be skirting suspiciously close to the 8 March, 2016 release date before the vast majority of you get a chance to get hands-on. And usually this wouldn't matter. For the most part – being the smart, intelligent folks that you are – you likely build an informed opinion on an upcoming release based on the information you receive reading **games™**, and let that guide the basis of your purchasing decision. That process shouldn't change just because one of the most anticipated games of 2016 has finally waded into a release window, but it has, hasn't it? The fear of disappointment still lingers from *Watch Dogs*; the trust is still broken from all of the graphical downgrade PR-storms; and the exhaustion of just *waiting* has become too much to bear. We're only human, after all, and a three-year marketing campaign has made us deliriously frustrated.

But do you know what didn't make us frustrated? Actually playing the game. While the upcoming Alpha and Beta tests will finally let Division Agents loose on the streets of Manhattan properly, **games™** got to dive into an early build of the PvP-focused 'Dark Zones' under what can only be described as chaotically controlled conditions. A sweaty conference hall, teamed up with two other players that had clearly never held an Xbox One controller, and an unapologetic Ubisoft rep barking instructions through a headset. Not perfect, but it would do – we'd been waiting since 2013 to get hands-on with Ubisoft Massive's open world behemoth, after all.



LEFT: *The Division*'s multi-format multiplayer beta has been moved to "early 2016" though a secretive Alpha is taking place through December, exclusively for Xbox One pre-order members.



SHOULD THE DIVISION BE MULTIPLAYER ONLY?

It's still the biggest lingering question

■ Could you still actually enjoy yourself making it through *The Division* rolling solo? That's the biggest lingering question, because everything we've seen and played thus far seems to be inherently multiplayer-focused. The game is supposedly designed to let you play on your own or supporting a group of friends, but considering how difficult it is to down enemies with people by your side, it raises serious questions about your potency acting as a lone wolf in the Five Boroughs. This is one of the biggest unanswered questions going into *The Division*'s beta early next year: can the game exist and be (dare we say it) *fun* in a purely single-player capacity? It's not that we have anything against multiplayer-focused games, but there's always the lingering fear that friends will still be stuck playing *Destiny* to care about any other team-based games; *Rainbow Six: Siege* recently suffered a similar fate.



ABOVE: By the time *The Division* releases on 8 March, 2016, we will have been almost three years waiting. For good reason, this might just be one of Ubisoft's most ambitious games in years.

From here it's a whirlwind of mixed emotions: one player purposefully avoids climbing into the Dark Zone – an area of the map where it's kill or be killed against other Agent teams in NYC for valuable loot drops – sprinting instead down a block in snowy Manhattan, and subsequently crashing the demo. The other desperately struggles to understand the concept of not shooting us in the back, clearly unable to distinguish a Division Agent from the enemies throwing their weight (and flamethrowers) around in the near distance – or perhaps he was just an being difficult. Still, that's multiplayer gaming for you. And all of this while we're just trying to take it all in, because *The Division* is *gorgeous*.

You don't have to believe the hype if you're intent on sticking to your negative guns, but *The Division* – even in its early Alpha build, and yes, even on Xbox One – is a visual delight. Massive Entertainment should be commended for replicating the size and scope of Manhattan; it honestly feels like the studio is taking Ubisoft Montreal's *Assassin's Creed* team to task in this regard. While our slice of gameplay was confined to one of the aforementioned PvP zones, it's exciting none the less to gaze upon (albeit briefly) towering apartment buildings, shimmering, rain-slicked rooftops and shadowy underground passages in the distance and know that we'll be able to explore it all.

The Division's city isn't a lifeless, visual backdrop; it's teeming with life and energy. That illusion is »



LEFT: *The Division* really does look stunning in action, the SnowDrop engine is proving to be a new force to be reckoned with in the industry.



created, in part, thanks to the incredible lighting and weather effects in action. We all saw that original reveal trailer and thought it wouldn't be possible, right? Well, somewhere, somehow, Massive is harnessing the power of these consoles unlike any other developer on the planet. Water gleams in the sunlight; snowflakes flutter during firefights; glass cracks and cascades across the roads as we open fire on a group of hostiles off in the distance.

What's immediately noticeable is the sense of weight that exists in your customisable, player-controlled avatar. You stride with purpose, snap into cover with calculated immediacy and ready a weapon with steady precision. This is a far cry from what we've come to expect from Ubisoft and this is where the excitement begins to build again. While *Rainbow Six: Siege* and *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* might be trying their best to re-bottle the lightning of *Tom Clancy* of two generations ago, *The Division* feels like it's legitimately trying to enhance and expand the brand and everything it represents.

We fire and enemies do not fall, not immediately. Damage numbers pop above heads as we notch away at a health bar, all the while using cover to suppress and flank our aggressors – our team mates might not know how to reload or switch weapons, but they sure know their basic military manoeuvres. While Ubisoft has always maintained that *The Division* is an RPG at heart, it's been easy enough to assume this was an empty promise made to separate the game from its deluge of open-world predecessors.

But, while *The Division* will of course have you overthrowing 'outposts' to regain control of territories – and honestly, we wouldn't be entirely surprised to see it have you skin wild dogs to craft warm woolly hats to make it through the harsh New York winter – it's actually a challenge to make it through a fight alive. Combat is slow and, at times, a little methodical. There's still a sweet spot that Massive needs to nail between the gulf of bullet-sponge enemies and a fun challenge. Like we said, it's unsettling that we are edging closer to release and this still hasn't been sorted, and exciting because it feels like uncharted waters for a publisher that's known to so heavily rely on its own conventions and practices.

It's worth mentioning that, at this point in our Dark Zone demo, we had come to the crossroads of the entire experience; where you have the option of either assisting or assaulting the array of other Division Agent teams that assemble in a courtyard attempting to extract valuable loot. Take down another team, successfully grab and get out of there with the extra loot, and you've earned a nice reward for being a bastard. Work together, and you'll have some assistance battling back the waves of incredibly difficult AI enemies that also swarm the area. To be honest, this is where it all fell apart a little bit. Why is there only one helicopter to extract loot? Why is there no clear and concise way to communicate or differentiate between other Division teams and enemies? And, as we soon learned right before we were staring at a respawn screen, why is there no melee button in *The Division* when it purposefully funnels you into close-quarters combat situations? All these questions will go unanswered until the beta runs, we imagine, but should they need to be asked in the first place? While the rest of the players ran wild as rogue agents, everyone firing wildly at one another until the clock ran to zero, we took the opportunity to see the real meat of the RPG systems – the skills, talents, perks and levels – in action.

Every adversary you might come across in *The Division* is tied to a level, just as your own Agent is. That means – not unlike *Fallout 3* – you are likely to encounter areas that are simply too tough to tackle until you've levelled up and geared out your character with the best the wasteland has to offer. Every level earned through killing enemies and completing objectives gives you an opportunity to gain access to more advanced technology, new skill modifications, as well as talents and perks to further enhance your particular play style.

Deciding your play style, and your role within the world of *The Division*, will be important. Specialising in the Medical, Tech and Security talent trees might not have had much impact in our Dark Zone demo, but in the final game – where you can make the distinction between adventuring solo, in groups or focused on PvP – it will be huge. Skills affect your Agent's distinct look, as well as having functional application within the game, while Perks will enhance certain skills and abilities. From the brief, cheeky browse we had through the menus, it looks like it has deep roots with everything that you might find yourself doing in the game.

So what to make of *The Division*? It's a game that seems to be bucking the Ubisoft trend. It looks incredible, it's inherently multiplayer focused and there's a contentious relationship between the PvE and PvP content. We aren't sold on the Dark Zones; it's far too chaotic to be truly satisfying, at least in its current state. The PvE content at this point is still a mystery, locked behind that pesky NDA, but we're excited to see what it has to offer. This isn't a traditional third-person shooter, nor is it a traditional *Tom Clancy* experience: it's going to offer something fresh, whether it works or not, well, it's far too early to say for sure.



ABOVE: The sense of scale in the world is truly impressive. After a stunning year for open worlds, *The Division* shows no signs of letting anything upstage it at this point. **RIGHT:** The gunplay is quite unlike anything else from Ubisoft. It's weighty and slow; forcing you to work with other players to take down foes.



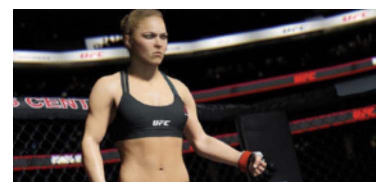
"MASSIVE SHOULD BE COMMENDED FOR REPLICATING THE SIZE AND SCOPE OF MANHATTAN; IT FEELS LIKE THE STUDIO IS TAKING ASSASSIN'S CREED TO TASK"





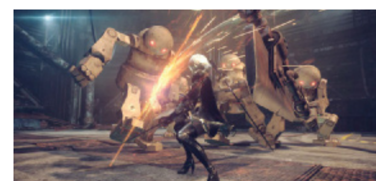






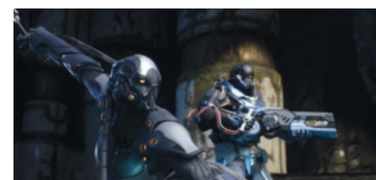
EA SPORTS UFC 2

■ With Ronda Rousey as cover star and the most famous and popular combatant in UFC today it's no surprise that women will also be added to the career mode of this game with full character creation as well as new training camp gameplay for your fighter.



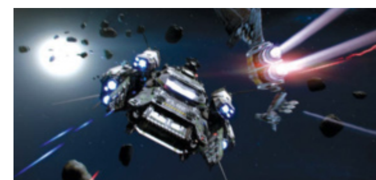
NIER: AUTOMATA

■ Set hundreds of years after *Nier* and made by a different developer, original producer Yosuke Saito and director Yoko Taro remain on board and are promising that this unexpected sequel maintains key gameplay and the humour of the original.



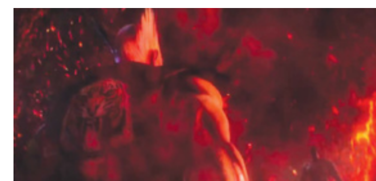
PARAGON

■ Expanding the ever-growing MOBA genre, Epic has now joined the fray with this PC and PS4 shooter. We're promised plenty of action and the now-standard regularly updated roster of characters. It could prove a major console exclusive for Sony,- too.



STAR CITIZEN

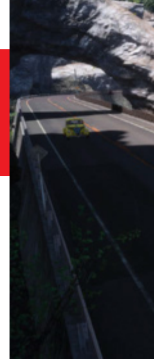
■ As if this ever-expanding space explorer wasn't ambitious enough in its gameplay, Cloud Imperium has been adding a star-studded cast to proceedings including Gary Oldman and Mark Hamill. The story mode is building into something spectacular.



TEKKEN 7

■ There's good news and bad news. The bad news is that fan-favourite feature Tekken Tunes, allowing you to play *Tekken* tracks won't be available in *Tekken 7*, at least at launch. The good news is that rumours are pointing to an early 2016 release.









10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT **FINAL FANTASY XV**

Format: PS4/Xbox One **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** In-House **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1

The road trip RPG rumbles ever closer

1 There's yet another version of the *Duscae* demo on the way apparently, hopefully giving us a chance to play around with the magic system that was sadly missing from the previous versions. As long as these constant demo updates aren't eating into the progress of the core game, we're all kinds of fine with this – more public exposure to games during development can only be a good thing and the team has made it clear that it is reacting to feedback.

2 Tetsuya Nomura may be off the project now to concentrate on *Kingdom Hearts III*, but his influence is still felt in terms of character design – Noctis and his pals all manage to feel distinct despite the style of the group being largely uniform. If anything, this is probably a good thing. Nomura seems to have a tendency to overthink designs these days… just look at his ludicrous DC 'reimaginings' for the PlayArts figure range.

3 Combat has been completely overhauled since the *Duscae* demo, meaning different types of attack are no longer tied to equipped weapons and enemy states. It sounds like the new system is much more open to creative expression, almost in line with character action games or notable action-RPGs such as the *Souls* series. Placing more power in players' hands also lends itself well to this generation's new bent towards sharing, watching and streaming.

4 Anyone who loved the cinematic summon sequences in previous games is in luck – *XV*'s summons are show-stopping moments that really put the engine to work. We've seen Ramuh's electrifying return and been given a glimpse at Leviathan so far, and this only serves to get us hyped for the more elaborate animations. Imagine summoning Knights Of The Round or Bahamut (especially after *A Realm Reborn*'s opening) in this engine. Yeah, sign us up.

5 On that topic, Ramuh's activation requires Noctis to be knocked out, suggesting that other summons will also bend the typical 'hit me up in the menu and let's wreck some shit' method. The potential here is huge – what if Ifrit only shows up once you've razed enough of the battlefield with fire spells, or Odin has a random chance of appearing on activation of skills, akin to *Fallout*'s recurring Mysterious Stranger perk? Don't drop the ball on this, Square…

6 Taking inspiration from real world locations allows the team to create settings that feel at once familiar and fantastical – as much as an area may look and feel a bit like Monaco or Vegas, the fantasy element of the game is still very much intact and helps to make places that you'll really want to explore. The grassy expanse of the Duscae region doesn't do the game any favours in this respect, but it's just one of many areas you'll traverse in the final game.

7 Those complaining about the action-heavy nature of the combat would do well to do a little homework. The last mainline traditional menu-based *FF* was over a decade ago (*XII* doesn't count – its Gambit system really helped shake things up) and action is where it's at these day. Hell, even the *FFVII* remake is taking a similar approach to battles. Zeboyd and other indies continue to represent the old-school approach, so it's hard to bemoan the progenitors for wanting to move on.

8 The tight focus on a core cast of characters should allow *FFXV* to tell a stronger story than party-based RPGs that allow characters to be swapped in and out at will. The likes of *Persona* and







the *Tales* games use social interactions aside from the main narrative to flesh out characters while allowing for each players' specific choices to feel like they matter but here, the constant cast (albeit one with a 'lads only' policy – an odd choice for Square) could yet show a positive side.

9 Hoping for mini-games? You got 'em. Only fishing has been shown off so far but Triple Triad remains popular (see also: a new iOS app pretty much built around the card game and the Gold Saucer in *FFXIV*), we'd be amazed if a variant of the simple collectible card game didn't make it in. Bonus marks if Square includes legacy character cards in addition to *XV*-based ones – we'll pay top dollar for a mint Squall holofoil.

10 While it might have been in development for a decade in some form, that's not cause for concern as it usually is. Several engine and platform changes (as well as some key staff movements) have altered the trajectory of development significantly, and Square Enix's clear responses to fan feedback have been promising. If the team does indeed manage to get the game finished for 2016, chances are it'll be worth the wait.



It's testament to the original's excellent world-building that locations like Midgar are still recognisable, despite the massive shift in graphics.

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE DRAWS CLOSER

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** In-House **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1

More than just a straight remake

Following Sony's PSX keynote, we've now had our first taste of what the long-rumoured *FFVII* remake has in store. Eschewing the original's turn-based combat for an action-based engine more in line with *FFXV* (some of the traversal animations are seemingly identical), it's a far cry from the verbatim retelling some were expecting, but it still looks great all the same.

We're not really feeling the new Barrett or Tifa right now (which leads to concerns over how quirkier characters like Red XIII and Cait Sith will be handled) but with news that the game will release in multiple parts comes hope for those holding out for turn-based combat – each part will apparently have its own unique flavour, though the full extent of this remains to be seen.





Certain characters look much more like their original character art than playable models; a welcome choice for fans of the original game.

NATHAN DRAKE

APPEARANCES Uncharted, Uncharted 2, Uncharted 3, Uncharted: Golden Abyss, Uncharted 4

BIO The charismatic star of the *Uncharted* series, famous for his quick-witted quips in between sprees of cover based mass murder, comes out of retirement to go searching for pirate treasure with his brother Sam in *Uncharted 4*.

THE WHO'S WHO OF UNCHARTED

Format: PS4 **Origin:** US **Publisher:** SCE **Developer:** Naughty Dog **Release:** 18/03/16 **Players:** 1

The intricate web of allegiances, betrayals, and grudges that define Naughty Dog's key players

VICTOR SULLIVAN

APPEARANCES *Uncharted*, Uncharted 2, Uncharted 3, Uncharted: Golden Abyss, Uncharted 4

BIO A veteran treasure hunter that took a young, orphaned Nate under his wing when he met him in Colombia, Sully has become a father figure that Nate can always count on. He might be getting too old for this…

ELENA FISHER

APPEARANCES Uncharted, Uncharted 2, Uncharted 3, Uncharted 4

BIO Elena is a journalist with a nose for trouble, just like love interest Drake. The pair have had a rocky relationship as a result of Drake's lust for adventure, but the pair settled down happily prior to the events of *Uncharted 4*.

CHLOE FRAZER

APPEARANCES Uncharted 2, Uncharted 3

BIO A tough and occasionally unscrupulous treasure hunter, Chloe has nevertheless been a valuable ally to Drake, working as a double agent for Lazarevic in *Uncharted 2* and fighting alongside him in *Uncharted 3*.

KATHERINE MARLOWE

APPEARANCES Uncharted 3

BIO *Uncharted 3*'s primary antagonist and Sully's former lover Marlowe is a cold and calculating leader of a dangerous secret society originally formed by Queen Elizabeth. Her search for the power hidden in Ubar ultimately ends in her demise.

HARRY FLYNN

APPEARANCES Uncharted 2

BIO Starting off as an ally of Drake's, aiding him in pilfering a sought-after treasure, Flynn betrays him by setting him up to take the blame. Flynn ends up working for Lazarević, which proves to be a poor decision in the end.

CHARLIE CUTTER

APPEARANCES Uncharted 3

BIO Chloe's significant other aids Drake by pretending to kill him after a pub brawl while "working" for Marlowe at the beginning of *Uncharted 3*, before hooking up again to fight by his side in Syria.

SAM DRAKE

APPEARANCES Uncharted 4

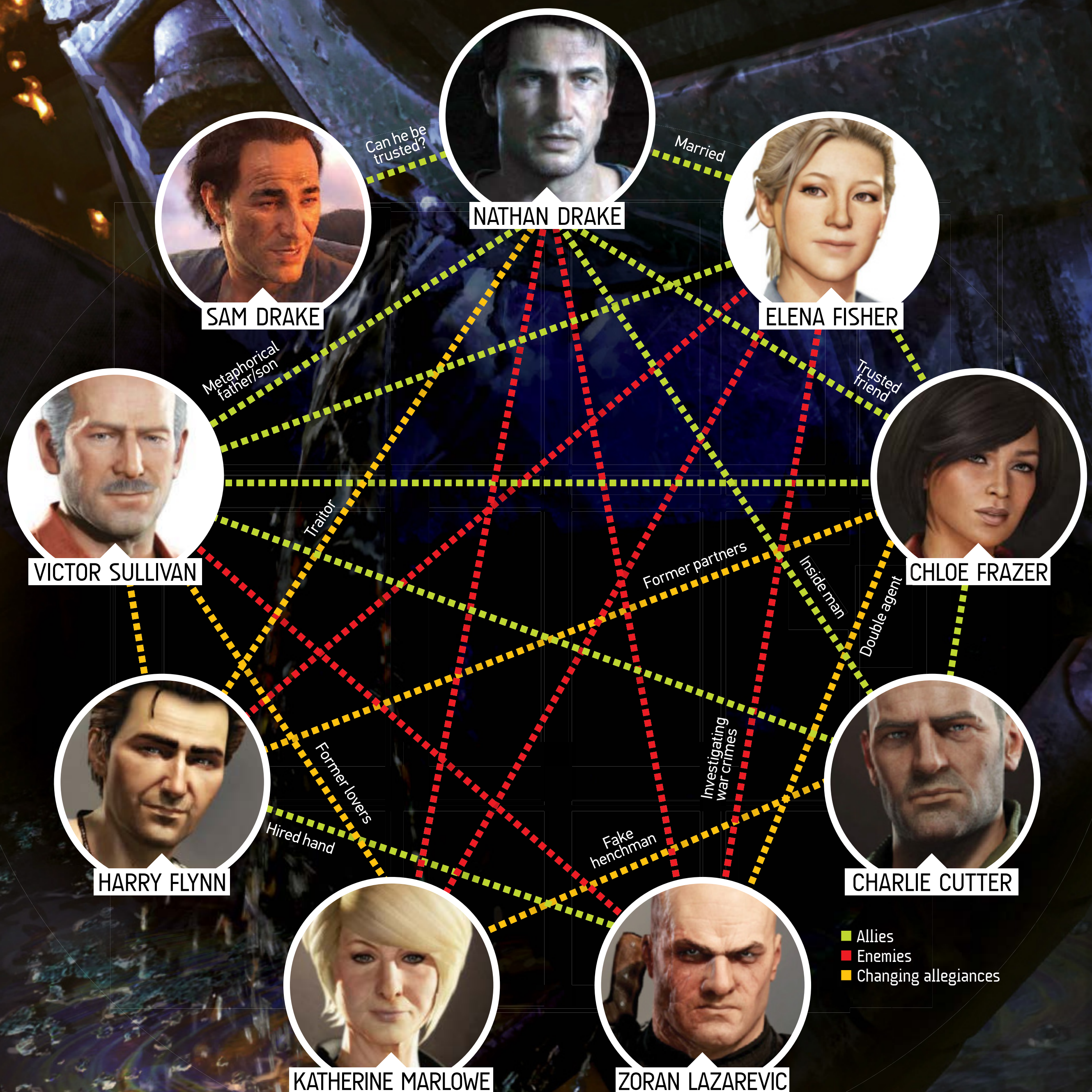
BIO We know very little about Drake's older brother, previously thought to be dead. This naturally leads to questions about what his motives are in hooking back up with Nate and whether he can be trusted.

ZORAN LAZAREVIĆ

APPEARANCES Uncharted 2

BIO A sadistic and ruthless war criminal, Lazarević hires Flynn to help him find the lost city of Shambhala. He also spends a lot of time trying to have Drake killed, eventually leading to his own death.

> “THIS NATURALLY LEADS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT HIS MOTIVES ARE IN HOOKING BACK UP WITH NATE AND WHETHER HE CAN BE TRUSTED”





■ LEFT: *No Man's Sky* is a much more populated and life-filled universe than we understand our own to be at present, but the worlds it envisions are not entirely out of the question.
BELOW: The visualisation of planets by Hello Games is not dissimilar from the projections exoplanet researchers might use to help form a better picture of the worlds they're looking at.



THE REAL SCIENCE BEHIND **NO MAN'S SKY**

Format: PS4 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Hello Games **Release:** June 2016 **Players:** MMO

We talked with exoplanet expert Prof. Didier Queloz about the reality behind Hello Games' vision

The search for undiscovered planets and what life might be on them is the primary interest of *No Man's Sky*, but it's also the life's work of many scientists around the world. The hunt for exoplanets – or extrasolar planets, which means any planet that orbits a star that isn't our own Sun – is driven by a thirst to understand more about our galaxy, our universe and perhaps even find habitable worlds like earth. We sat down with exoplanets expert and Cambridge University's Professor Didier Queloz to find out a little about the real science that's inspired the thinking of *No Man's Sky*.

For a start *No Man's Sky* is a massive game, but that only reflects the reality of planetary formations in space "If you stay just in the galaxy, already in the galaxy there is more than a hundred *billion* stars! Imagine if you bring a couple of planets on each of the stars, imagine how many planets there are," Queloz enthuses. So many in fact that in searching for them we have to take a pragmatic approach.

"Usually, we work the easy way, which means we try to explore the planets on stars as close as possible, or on stars as bright as possible," he continues. "The next stage will be to look for life on these planets. Which it's very likely to have, because life is chemistry. Having simple life, microscopic, it's kind of, for me, expected. What may be more difficult is to get *macroscopic* life, something you can see. This came quite late in the case of the Earth, but is a very simple reaction that could be understood as a life mechanism and is, I think, very likely to be seen on any other planet that has the best ingredients to start the process."

And this is why water is so important, because it's an amazing substance for sustaining even the simplest of lifeforms. "It's a solvent for chemistry, and when there is life, there is transmission," says Queloz. "So it's a very simple way to move around without being too sophisticated, without having legs, just being in the water. It's a solvent; as soon as you are insulated, you get a good material to move around and evolve."

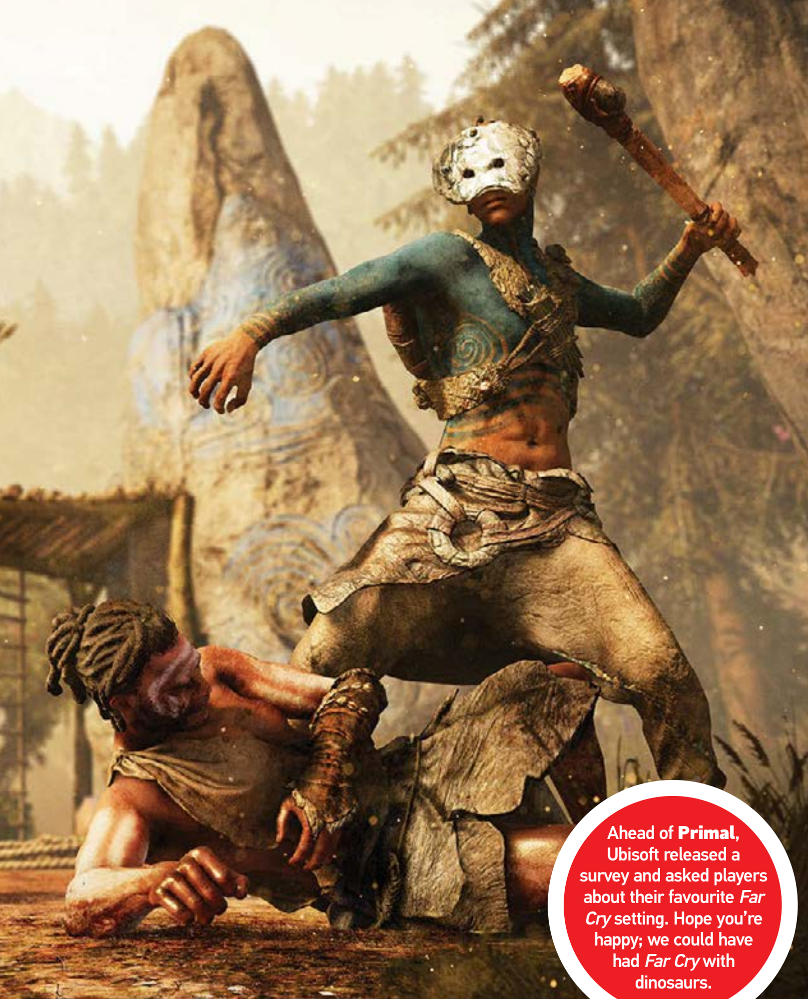
But here's where we get the sticky part and something that *No Man's Sky* may well choose to explore too, what if water isn't the only thing that can sustain life? What if our universal view is a little too earth-centric? "Water *is* seen as a very important element here, but is it a prerequisite? That's to be debated. Maybe there's some other solvent to be used? But it's certainly the easiest one, like carbon; everyone is expecting the mystery to be made of carbon because carbon is seen everywhere in the galaxy. Water is very common as well, that's why water and carbon must be the obvious ingredient that can be found in many places."

But what *No Man's Sky* taps into more than anything is our thirst for exploration and that's something Queloz understands well. "I think, as a species, we are very curious, and we have been exploring the whole earth. In a way, the exploration of the earth, it's not *completely* done, but it's almost done," he explains. "The next horizon is clearly going to other stars. We are astronomers these days, and people teaming up in astronomy teams, trying to get to these planets and understand them – we are, in a similar way, doing the same work that people were doing exploring the earth in the 13th, 14th Century. Maybe later, in 500 years, we will be sending probes there and having pictures. And maybe we will be able to travel into space later. It's really a kind of interesting comparison you have; it's this exploration, this adventurous aspect that is a part of our species. We are *all* a bit like that."



■ RIGHT: Thanks to exoplanet research we know more about the way in which our own solar system, the galaxy and our universe were formed. What innovations this might lead us to, we don't know, but such studies previously helped us conquer space travel and in turn lead to the interconnected world we now enjoy.





Ahead of **Primal**, Ubisoft released a survey and asked players about their favourite *Far Cry* setting. Hope you're happy; we could have had *Far Cry* with dinosaurs.

FAR CRY PRIMAL HITS THE RESET BUTTON

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal **Release:** 23 February 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

Into the wild

It really can go either way at this point. It stands to reason that *Far Cry Primal* will either be the hot injection of life the series is desperately in need of (after Ubisoft joyously coasted through on familiarity with the release of *Far Cry 4*) or it'll be a disastrous step too far into the unknown. Ubisoft Montreal is taking its particular brand of action away from sun-soaked paradises and into the Stone Age.

10,000 BC isn't an era many videogames feel comfortable tackling. Fire, not a fully automatic assault rifle, stands as humankind's greatest creation so far, while sticks and stones are the only tools available to break bones. It should come together to make *Primal* something of a clean slate for the franchise. Weapons will need to be crafted, with resources scavenged from the open world of Oros – protected diligently by wildlife such as mammoths and saber-toothed tigers – though you'll need to act fast, rival tribes diligently stalk the shadows trying to take over your territory.

Primal is putting you at a true disadvantage for the first time in *Far Cry's* history. While the odds were always stacked against you – typically you'd touch down in a foreign land usually amid some sort of delirious power struggle before murdering everything in sight – this time you'll be tasked with trying desperately to survive by hunting for food and learning to make man's red fire while the whole world thrashes out around you. Whether it can still stay true to *Far Cry's* legacy remains unknown, but you should be excited to burn through a different era of history all the same.





Ghost Recon Wildlands will feature the largest open-world environment Ubisoft has ever created.

HOW REALISTIC IS GHOST RECON WILDLANDS?

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Paris **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Paris **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1-4

We speak with a military tactician to get a fresh view on Tom Clancy's latest venture

Tom Clancy used to be synonymous with tough, tactical experiences. This become diluted somewhat last gen, and now Ubisoft is desperately trying to claw that back. *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is the latest to try, taking modern warfare into an expansive open-world interpretation of Bolivia, letting you and three friends fight against a flood of drug cartel brutality.

"The *Tom Clancy* brand has always done much better at keeping it real, in my opinion," Jon Davis told **games™**, a Marine Corps Marksmanship Instructor and Iraq war veteran. "[Ubisoft] has stayed closer to what people might expect in a real war than other franchises like *Call Of Duty*. *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* seems to be attempting to add realism in a way that hasn't really been done before. By incorporating multiple avenues of mission accomplishment, they are taking the baby steps toward giving a player the actual scope of versatility that real troops enjoy in actual force-on-force encounters."

Wildlands is not only set to appease oldschool *Ghost Recon* fans, but it's also preparing to push the concept of team-based shooters forward. There's a very real chance *Wildlands* will even solve what Davis calls "the fundamental flaw of first-person shooters. Real fire teams (four-person assault teams) use one another to move, envelope, and overwhelm the enemy. One person equipped with a machine gun suppresses the movement of an individual or small group behind cover. He doesn't wipe them out, he keeps them from moving, while his buddy is free to move around for an easy shot. He then provides suppressive fire so that other members of the team can move freely. This method of using overlapping fields of fire and suppression is how real militaries fight."

Sometime in 2016, this is how we are going to be able to fight. *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* needs to prove that Ubi can break away from its own bloated open-world template and give us truly realistic modern warfare.

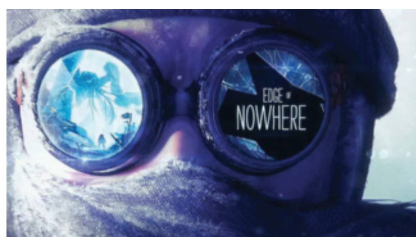
Can Virtual Reality games keep up with the technology?

OCULUS RIFT VS



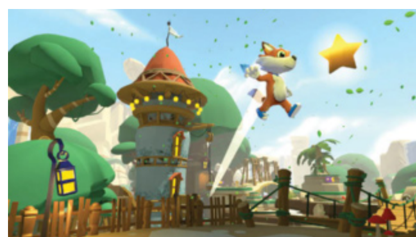
CHRONOS

■ One of the coolest aspects of virtual reality is how it's opening up the imagination of both the gaming public and developers. *Chronos* is an innovative new third-person RPG that sees an adventurer attempting to navigate through a mysterious labyrinth to save his people. The catch? The door only opens once every 12 months, and failure will see your character thrown out – waiting a full year before they can venture back into the depths. You'll have to deal with an aging adventurer, relying on wit and caution as you get older.



EDGE OF NOWHERE

■ If any studio can make third-person action work in virtual reality, we have a feeling it's going to be Insomniac Games. The studio – responsible for the likes of *Ratchet & Clank* and *Sunset Overdrive* – will be dropping you into the Antarctic mountains for this Oculus Rift exclusive, but what will begin as a rescue mission will quickly take a turn for the surreal in this trippy (and almost certainly terrifying) 2016 VR adventure.

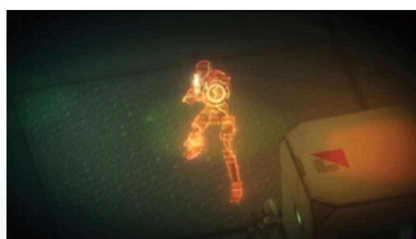


LUCKY'S TALE

■ For almost as long as Oculus Rift development kits have been in hands of gamers worldwide, there has been a vocal group raving about this VR exclusive third-person adventure. It's colourful and playful in a way that will conjure fond memories of *Super Mario 64* and *Banjo-Kazooie*. Better still, Playful Games just received $25 million from private investors to ensure it not only lives up to the hype, but surpasses it when it launches alongside Oculus Rift in 2016.



■ The Oculus Rift headset has been through a number of iterations, finally landing on this relatively light design that feels pretty living-room friendly compared to others.



DAMAGED CORE

■ Launching exclusively on Oculus Rift in May 2016, *Damaged Core* will see the ever-popular FPS genre land on the emerging VR tech. While it has come a long way in recent years – to the point where motion sickness has been all but eradicated in most tech demos – it's still too early to know how a 90 frames-per second shooter, where the action unfolds across a full 360 degree stereoscopic viewpoint, will actually fare in the wild.



■ While many have been designing and prototyping Oculus games with Xbox controllers, these motion controls could be a massive new addition to the tech.

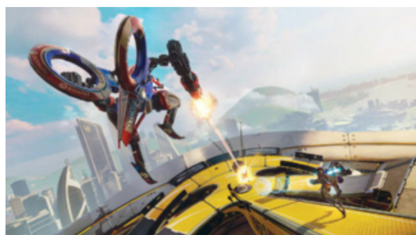


EVE: VALKYRIE

■ Every console needs a system seller, and it looks like Oculus Rift has just received its first; *Eve: Valkyrie*. The upcoming multiplayer dogfighting game will not only be premiering first on the platform – before later appearing on PlayStation VR – but it will also ship with all pre-orders of Oculus Rift in Q1 2016. This is hugely exciting news; *Valkyrie* is not only the first game to truly make virtual reality feel like a viable game platform, but it's also a stunning and attention-arresting venture for anybody that has a tendency to keep their heads in the stars. Fans of the space battles found in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Wars* pay attention, because you've quite literally never played anything like this before.

With Oculus Rift and PlayStation VR scheduled to release in 2016, it's time the spotlight was shone on legitimate game experiences instead of glorified tech demos. Will the tech join Kinect and PlayStation Move in gimmick hell, or does it have the games to survive?

PLAYSTATION VR



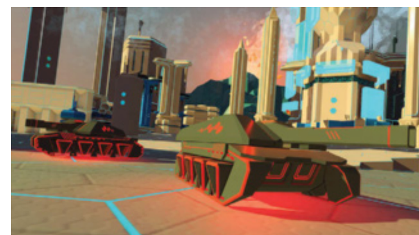
RIGS: MECHANIZED COMBAT LEAGUE

Considering you have a full 360 field of vision in VR, there's very real potential for sports springing to life in videogames like never before. Still, we aren't quite there yet – but we do have *RIGS: Mechanized Combat League*. A fast and frantic first-person action sports game that's essentially a cool blend of Capture the Flag and basketball. It's going to require a lot of teamwork and positional awareness, but then that's all part of the fun.



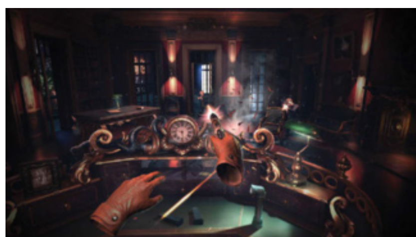
PSYCHONAUTS IN THE RHOMBUS OF RUIN

If a *Psychonauts* sequel wasn't exciting enough, Double Fine has also revealed that much loved platformer will also be making its way to PlayStation VR in the near future. Studio head Tim Schafer revealed that the studio will be making a "completely unique, standalone adventure" that will bridge the gap between the cult classic and the future instalment. Considering the thematic content of *Psychonauts* – which sees players jumping into the minds and imaginations of others – there's a pretty good chance *Rhombus Of Ruin* will be a rather surreal and trippy adventure. While no release date has been given, this is already one of PlayStation VR's most anticipated exclusives, if only because Double Fine has never been a studio afraid to indulge in a little insanity.



BATTLEZONE

Remember *Battlezone*? You know, the Atari arcade game from the Eighties? It's okay; it hasn't aged well enough to be worth remembering anyway. That's why Rebellion has bought the rights and has begun development on one of the best PlayStation VR games out there. It's essentially a futuristic take on *World Of Tanks* with simple, yet strangely great, *Tron*-style graphics that's proving to be well suited to the tech. It's well worth keeping your eyes on this one in the coming year.



THE LONDON HEIST

We still haven't seen a lot of shooters appear in virtual reality just yet, but that's why we are hoping *The London Heist* can be a proof of concept. At its most basic, it's a VR update of *Time Crisis*; an on-rails shooter in which you utilise the 3D space to dodge bullets with your body and track enemies with actual head movements. It could be incredibly innovative, or it could be the PS4's *Red Steel*, it's just too early to tell.



REZ INFINITE

Rez always felt like a game that was designed to be played in virtual reality. The 2001 Dreamcast release from Tetsuya Mizuguchi was ahead of its time in that respect; an engrossing, rhythmic shooter that revelled in melting the minds of players with its thumping music and blistering pace. Well, here we are 15 years later and *Rez Infinite* is a reality - a VR-enabled remake of the original. Already proving to be one of the best PlayStation VR games yet, this will be a must-play in 2016.



PlayStation VR has the benefit of looking like something out of science fiction, giving it more of a premium, groundbreaking feel than the more functional competition.

The fixed ecosystem of PS4 hardware could mean that we see a steadier and more consistent stream of games released than on the PC platforms.

2016 MOST WANTED

BETTER EQUIPMENT

Finding valuable resources and blueprints of long forgotten alien technology will give you the opportunity to craft better equipment, better biotics and new weapons.

EVERYTHING WE KNOW ABOUT MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA

IMPROVED MOVEMENT

Upgrades can be made to specific parts of the body; such as improving your leg armour to let your character withstand the impact of a jetpack jump.

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** BioWare **Release:** Q4 2016 **Players:** 1-TBA

A long time ago, in a galaxy not that far away...

Mass Effect Andromeda is coming; if that statement alone doesn't whip you up into frenzy of excitement and mild-delusion, then we can't imagine anything will. The emotional scars left by 2012's *Mass Effect 3* have (just about) healed, the dust has settled on the original trilogy, and BioWare is now hard at work designing an entire new galaxy for us to conquer. Andromeda, which is around 2.5 million light years away from the Milky Way (and the adventures of Commander Shepard), will be the setting of this all-new chapter in the *Mass Effect* franchise and it's shrouded in mystery.

But with a project this big, with so much excitement bursting out of the community, it was only inevitable that information would begin to slip through the cracks. **games™** has dug deep into the rumours, the cryptic tweets and the small reveals of the universe to detail exactly what you should expect from *Mass Effect: Andromeda* when it launches late into 2016.

RETURN OF THE MAKO

BioWare is returning to its roots

You'll be able to once again strap yourself back into the M35 Mako, but it has undergone some quite significant changes. The turret appears to have been removed, suggesting combat won't be a priority. As the new N7 team heads out into uncharted territory, the focus will be on exploration, with the improved Mako being at the centre of it all. The focus will be on speed and handling, and it's expected that the vehicle will even have light customisation options to it as well.



UNKNOWN FORCE

A new and ancient race of enemies will be awakened as you enter the Andromeda system, no doubt confused and agitated by your presence (and resource-stealing).

N7 CLUB

That N7 badge is a reminder that this character had some relation to the events of original trilogy; it designates the highest level of proficiency an Alliance officer can receive from graduating the Interplanetary Combatives Training program.



THE RUMOURED STORY SO FAR

2015's N7 Day video may have revealed more than you realise

"We are travellers; constantly moving forward and looking back. Alone and as one. We have no choice but to try. For our insatiable curiosity; for our fear of what should happen if we don't; you are that explorer now. We will say goodbye, and you will look back one last time and know that wherever you go, we will be with you. This is Commander Sheppard, signing off." – Commander Shepard

BioWare has been keeping the story details incredibly close to its chest; pretty impressive considering it's been teasing *Mass Effect Andromeda* since 2013. But what can we learn from that Commander Shepard speech? It seemingly sees the Commander signing off on a new adventure; not only implying that the events of *Andromeda* were set into motion during the original trilogy, but that the survival of sentient life was put into your hands as the Reaper threat became too much to handle.

The video clearly shows a ship, much greater in size than the Normandy, leaving the Milky Way and heading toward Andromeda. The biggest question now, though, is this: does this mean we may have even come across this new team at some point during the original *Mass Effect* games? It's certainly something to think about.

WHAT IS THE PATHFINDER INITIATIVE?

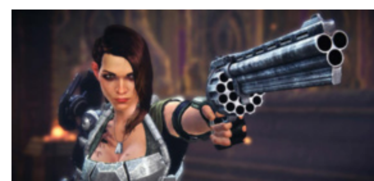
What do we know about the leading roles?

BioWare has been handing out clothing to *Mass Effect: Andromeda* devs, and a lot of it is adorned with a 'Pathfinder Initiative' patch, along with the mysterious acronym, 'A.R.K.C.O.N.'. The mention of a Pathfinder Initiative does link up nicely with leaks from an official EA survey. Said leak puts you in the boots of a Pathfinder; a combat trained operative tasked with leading expeditions into new territories in an attempt to establish a new home for humanity. Growing your arsenal, collecting resources, building colonies and battling through a series of solar systems over four times the size of *ME3* are also mentioned, and it all lines up with previously known information about the upcoming title.



HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

Not too much longer to wait for this exciting *TLOZ*-inspired roguelike as its promised release window of Spring 2016 draws ever-closer. This remains one of the best Early Access titles we've played in the last year; we remain as eager as ever to see it finished.



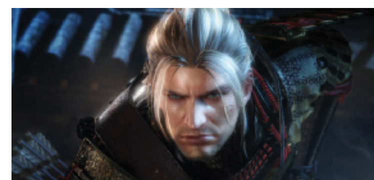
BOMBSHELL

Picking up the mantle of *Duke Nukem* for Interceptor and 3D Realms, *Bombshell* was originally an isometric actioner for the vest-wearing brute, but is now a vehicle for a brand new hero with a mechanic arm and similar lack of patience for alien scum.



HELLBLADE

Ninja Theory's continued pursuit of excellence has seen many changes to *Hellblade* after its initial reveal, not least a move to full body scanning to recreate its hero Senua in an even more realistic fashion. The level of detail achieved with the tech is stunning.



NIOH

We thought it dead, but *Ni-Oh* (now *Nioh*) is real, it's coming back and it's looking pretty hot all things considered. If anything it looks like it might be coming into its own at just the right time with gameplay and a world that has a distinct *Dark Souls* vibe.



FOR HONOR

Ubisoft's innovative sword-battler remains one of the most intriguing games of the year with its knights, vikings and samurai facing each other in tense three versus three warfare. Will it have enough to sustain extended interest in 2016? We think it just might.

WHAT'S IN A DREAM?

In attempting to unleash the pure imagination of its players and turn the PS4 into a creative platform, Media Molecule has chosen the name *Dreams* very wisely. The whole point is that it should be a sandbox for your wildest musings, allowing you to create any scene and any style of gameplay you would wish. Or no gameplay at all. The point is, *Dreams* doesn't have the defined limitations of *LittleBigPlanet*. The team is looking to simplify and expand on that concept here.

IT'S TIME TO DEMYSTIFY **DREAMS**

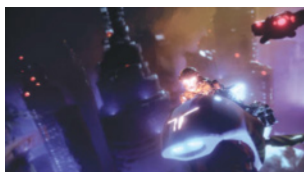
Format: PS4 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Media Molecule **Release:** TBC 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

What is Media Molecule's latest creative endeavour looking to achieve?



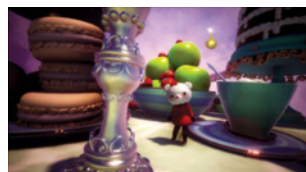
THE IMP IS YOUR CURSOR

The little smily character you see is the Imp and it's essentially your cursor and mascot in the world. Like Sackboy, it can be customised and personalised, but it's also your interface with the creative side of the game. It's the means by which you'll be able to manipulate objects, paint and sculpt the levels or scenes you're creating. The Imp can also be used to possess characters in the world, so you can leap into the body of a character and begin moving them around with the left stick like in any 3D game you can think of.



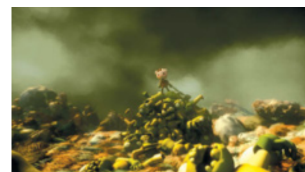
LINKS BETWEENS WORLDS

Another important element of *Dreams* that's building on the concept of interconnecting levels in *LittleBigPlanet* is that your dream worlds in this game can be linked together too, but they don't necessarily need to be anything alike. The idea is to replicate the way in which our own dreamstates can sometimes concoct and mix strange premises together with seemingly no better connection than stepping through a door or looking out a window. Your brain isn't shackled by aesthetic consistency when you sleep and *Dreams* won't do that to you either.



IT COULD BE THE NEXT MINECRAFT

Saying that *Dreams* is like *Minecraft* may seem like an odd suggestion, but actually they may prove to be very similar. The key is that *Dreams* can be played as a creative sandbox rather than simply a tool for making and publishing levels. That means you and a bunch of friends can populate the game together and just build, test and interact to your hearts content without ever publishing a thing. It's your creative world and you can make whatever you like. In this sense it's not unlike creative mode in *Minecraft*.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Much like *LittleBigPlanet*, we're expecting that virtually every aspect of game-making will be opened up to us from the animation of the characters to music composition and thanks in-part to the extra power of the PS4, some more voice acting too. It was something of a limitation on the PS3, but the added processing power of PS4 may well open up performance capture for us all to enjoy. We're keen to find out if it might also allow for the PlayStation Eye to body capture movement in the way Kinect and *Project Spark* have done on Xbox One.

2016 MOST WANTED

SETTING THE FPS STRAIGHT WITH DOOM

Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Bethesda Softworks **Developer:** id Software **Release:** 2016 **Players:** TBC

id Software's return to Doom could be the breath of acrid, hellish air we've all been waiting for

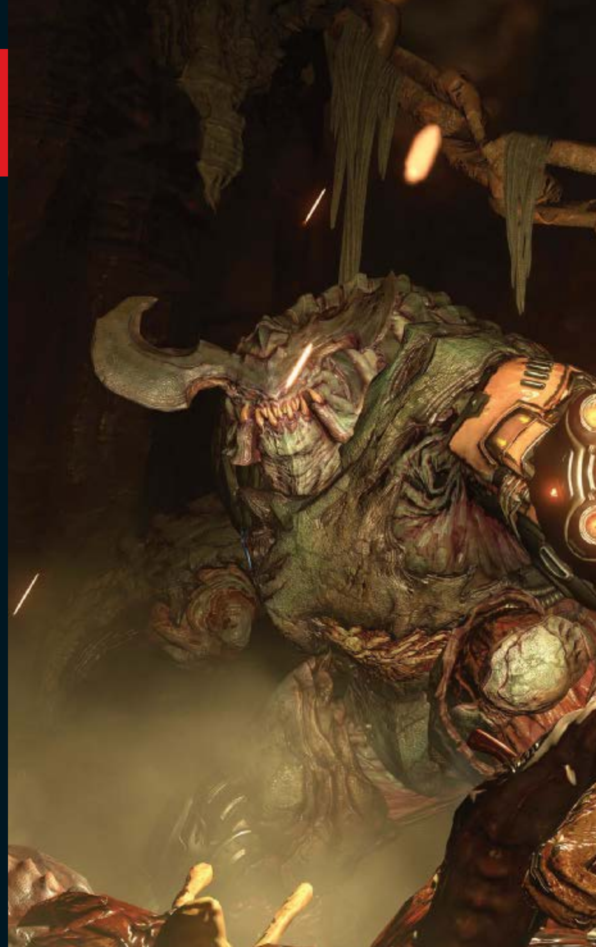
An entire console generation, that's how long we've been waiting to crawl back into the bowels of hell with an array of weaponry strapped to our backs. But 2016 will finally see id Software return to *Doom* – the granddaddy of FPS games – and it's got a lot of ground to cover if it wants any chance of standing shoulder to shoulder with its contemporaries. That's not to say it's impossible, but it's going to be tough to drag people away from what they know. That's why id Software is doubling down on elements it knows its target audience – teenagers with a penchant for ultra-violence and aging gamers for some future-retro action – will be all in for. *Doom* is looking faster than ever before, with players urged to really run wild against the scourge of the underworld. Weapons are bigger and beastlier; gore and violence is so over the top it seems like it was specifically designed to enrage disgruntled *Daily Mail* readers; while the action is more furious than anything we've seen so far this generation.

We can only hope that id takes a few cues from *Wolfenstein: The New Order* developer Machine Games; the studio managed to stay beholden to what made the franchise great to begin within, whilst dragging it kicking and screaming into relevance. *Doom* is utilising a push forward combat system that is rarely used in modern development – it's a model of design that forces players to abandon resting behind cover or hiding to regain health. Instead, *Doom* is incredibly oldschool in its sensibilities; there's no health regeneration system (health pickups and enemy kills are your only saviour here), no cover mechanics, and enemy AI designed to push constant pressure on your position. It sounds exhausting, but that's exactly what's missing from modern FPS design.

Where *Doom* will really live or die, however, is with its multiplayer offering. id is working with Certain Affinity – a studio born of ex-Bungie staffers and regular contributors to the 343 Industries era of the *Halo* franchise – to get *Doom* in a position where it can compete. But where every triple-A studio seems to be chasing after eSports arena success, id is simply content with doing what it's always done best. The studio is no stranger to tight, arena-focussed gameplay – hell, it practically invented it with *Quake* – and we should expect nothing but the best here too.

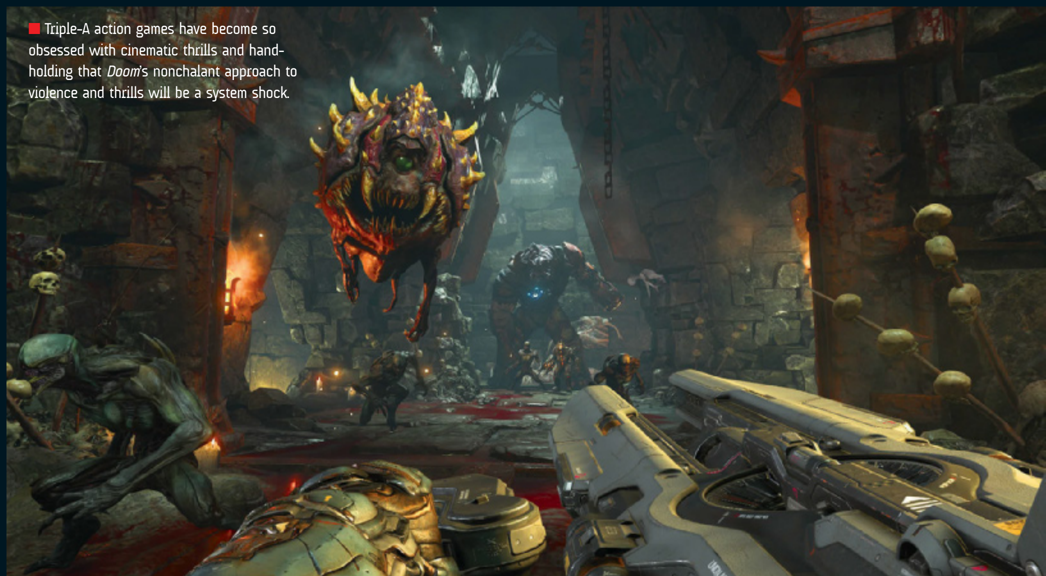
Admittedly, we are a little concerned with the longevity of such a multiplayer style, especially as it will be without the common *Call Of Duty*-established progression loops, though we expect the built-in map creation tools will keep *Doom* fresh long after the hype dies down. *Doom*'s SnapMap will allow players to construct their own custom maps, modes and then get them shared out across the online community with support from the studio. *Doom* might be resolutely oldschool in its design, but it's exactly that stripped back design ethos that could be what disgruntled FPS fans are looking for.

"DOOM IS UTILISING A PUSH FORWARD COMBAT SYSTEM THAT IS RARELY USED IN MODERN DEVELOPMENT"





Doom will be inherently familiar to any players of *Unreal Tournament* and *Quake*, it's promising fast and frantic action that demands true skill to succeed.



Triple-A action games have become so obsessed with cinematic thrills and hand-holding that *Doom*'s nonchalant approach to violence and thrills will be a system shock.









It's been over a decade since *Doom 3*, and id Software is taking the franchise back to the drawing board as it looks to introduce it to a new generation of gamers.

ORIGINAL DOOM CREATOR **JOHN ROMERO** TALKS THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF DOOM

Even now, after 22 years, the original *Doom* still holds up. What is it about the series that has helped it stand the test of time?

I think it just feels like a solid game and plays really well. It's still challenging for pros but easy for beginners. It retains the fear factor when you're exploring in the dark and are low on health and ammo. The gameplay is very fast and enables high levels of skill, yet the enemies all move pretty slowly.

***Doom* is often credited with starting the FPS genre, which is now (in many ways) the genre one immediately thinks of when videogames come up in conversation. What is it about shooting things in the face that resonates with such a broad audience?**

I think it's the viewpoint that helps the player feel immersion and that they are in the game. Also, we experimented with various ways of vanquishing enemies in our games prior to *Wolfenstein 3D* and found that guns are just far more fun than anything else. So, guns won. Shooting things in the face lets you release aggression in a safe place, the computer, as opposed to on the streets.

Every year there seems to be yet another round of complaints from a slightly bigger slice of the audience saying the FPS genre is stagnating. Do you think developers are running out of ways to reinvent the shooter?

I agree that there should be more experimentation in FPS stories and settings. There was a World War II glut for a long time. Established franchises have also entrenched themselves by nature of their setting in time. *Call Of Duty* was WWII for a long time before they switched to modern warfare. *Halo* is always sci-fi and the first three games repeated a similar format.

With the release of the Xbox One and PS4, not to mention the advancements we are seeing in the PC space, do you think development has become too reliant on technology?

Development has always been reliant on technology. There will always be newer, faster computers to make games for. This has been a trend since home computers arrived in the late 70s.

Have you seen much of the upcoming Doom from id Software? If so, do you think it's heading in the right direction?

I haven't seen much of *Doom 4* since the video released online. The graphics look great. I have no idea how it plays and won't know until I have it.

A lot has been said about *Doom*'s violence over the years, do you think this gets blown out of proportion, or is it a legitimate concern?

It's topical for a bit after the game comes out, then another game's violence pulls the focus away. I think its violence is overrated. The new *Doom 4* looks like it's vying with *Mortal Kombat X* for over-the-top gore. In a few years it'll be ho-hum compared to the latest game.

What are you working on next – the world needs a little more Romero in it!

I'm working on a new shooter, an FPS. Can't say anything about it yet!



THE PROMISE OF **DETROIT**

Format: PS4 **Origin:** France **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Quantic Dream **Release:** TBC 2016 **Players:** 1

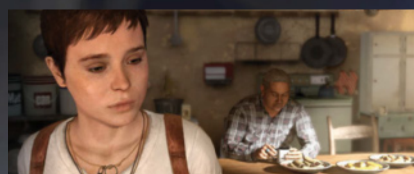
Quantic Dream's latest wasn't always a game – like many of its releases, the idea for Detroit was actually conceived in a tech demo unveiled well before its final form was revealed…

HEAVY RAIN (2010)



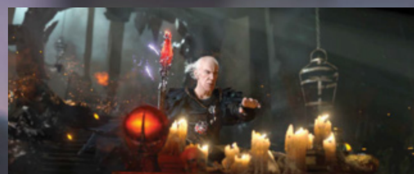
The first reveal of what would become *Heavy Rain* was called *The Casting*, a non-playable tech demo showcased at E3 2006. It was actually built before the final specs of the PS3 were formally announced. The tech demo was focused on capturing and replicating an actor's physical presence, and creating a digital double.

BEYOND: TWO SOULS (2013)

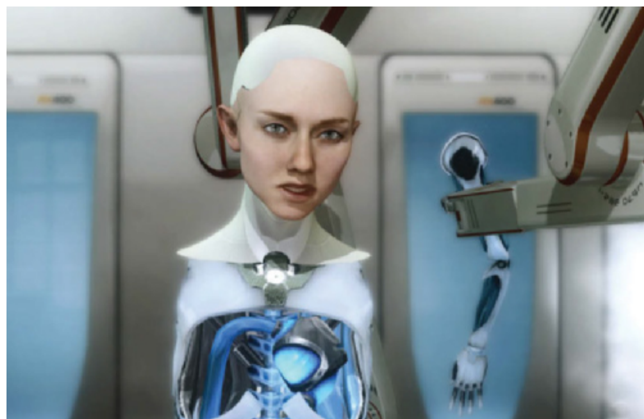


The trailer for *Beyond* was packed with action, a much higher-octane affair than we'd seen in either *Fahrenheit* or *Heavy Rain*. The trailer was much more 'Hollywood' than anything Quantic Dream had put out before, and that was reflected in the final action-driven release that *Beyond* would ultimately be.

THE DARK SORCERER (TBC)



Featuring real-time 3D rendering of an actor's face cycling through a series of emotions, *The Dark Sorcerer* was built to communicate the power of the PS4 and what it allows developers to do. But might it be Quantic Dream's next project too?



2012 KARA VS. 2016 DETROIT

Running on a PlayStation 3, *Kara* was built to show off a new game engine capable of utilising new forms of motion capture technology. The demo – while only short – outlined exactly where *Detroit*'s eventual story would lead: when Kara awakens, she poses a philosophical conundrum to her operator when she makes it clear she's (somehow) been given the ability to think freely.

This discovery of free will and Kara's place as a being lying somewhere on the human/machine boundary will form the foundation of *Detroit*, and director David Cage has insisted that this game will focus more on 'emotional storytelling' than any Quantic Dream game that's come before. Expect moral choices, persecution and a *lot* of philosophy-for-beginners style exposition in a game that may find a way to finally fuse the idea of game mechanics in an interactive drama game. Think about it – if the player is basically seen as the processing unit in Kara's AI core, it means we will essentially be her operator, to a degree. It might result in a smart way of letting us choose actions and create real consequence in a world without it all feeling a bit too Telltale.



GRAVITY RUSH 2 BRINGS PHYSICS FUN TO PS4

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** SCE Japan Studio **Release:** TBC 2016 **Players:** 1

Falling for it again…



Gravity Rush was one of the earliest PS Vita exclusives, and unlike most of the games available on Sony's little console that could(n't), *Gravity Rush* actually made *incredibly* good use of the latent hardware features: hitting a button and moving your Vita around would suspend protagonist Kat in the air, while you chose the direction she'd fall. It'll be a shame to see that feature downplayed on console, even if it was just a gimmick. At least the DualShock 4 can replicate *some* of the Vita's feature-set, though.

BACK TO BASICS WITH RATCHET & CLANK

Format: PS4 **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Insomniac Games **Release:** 12 April 2016 **Players:** 1

Since you'll be getting to know these erstwhile adventurers all over again when the *Ratchet & Clank* reboot hits, we've taken it upon ourselves to reintroduce you to the dynamic duo – just so you can get to know them before things start getting shooty.

RATCHET

SPECIES Lombax **HOMEPLANET** Fastoon

One of few remaining Lombax, Ratchet was sent away from his home planet as a child due to continued and aggressive attacks on the Lombax race. Ratchet landed on Veldin – a relatively peaceful garden planet – and managed to set up a garage from which he worked and lived. Veldin's long, clear nights had Ratchet forlornly looking up and stargazing, dreaming of exploring the vast Solana Galaxy and emulating the actions of his hero, Captain Qwark. Driven by a desire to become a hero (maybe it's in his blood…) the enterprising Lombax began constructing a ship out of Veldin's scrap, held together by elastic bands and discarded chewing gum, and set his sights on the stars once more.

CLANK

SPECIES Model XJ-0461 **HOMEPLANET** Quartu

Clank is a small, defective sentry bot that came to consciousness slightly before he should on the factory line and managed to escape the shackles of oppression thrust upon him in the robot factory. His escape went well (sort of), but his ship malfunctioned as he fled and Clank was eventually sent on a trajectory towards Veldin – where he'd later meet Ratchet. The two got on as soon as they met – both outcasts from everything they'd ever known, trying to make a way on this backwater planet, they had more in common than they first thought. Ratchet referred to Clank by his robot name for a while, but one day, when Ratchet's ship rocked and Clank hit the floor with a, well, *clank*, his new nickname was born… and that's what he became known as across the galaxy.

2016 MOST WANTED

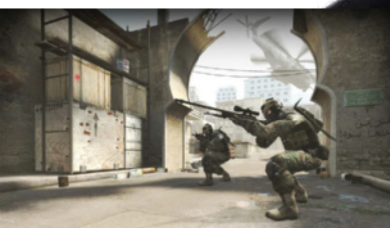
STEAM MACHINES



There are many different models of the Steam Machine, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, but options may breed confusion for new consumers.









While the PS4 and Xbox One will continue to dominate the gaming landscape in 2016 and the next Nintendo console will look to shift the conversation a little, it's the Steam Machines and Apple TV, launched in late 2015, that could yet prove to be the real living room disruptors in the coming 12 months. As they begin to establish their place in the market, and without a killer app to draw attention just yet, we spent some time with both machines as well as chatting with iOS game developer Steve Stopps, founder of Team Lumo, about how these new machines could impact our gaming lives.

WHO'S GOT THE GAMES?

Without question right now it's all about Steam, although we have experienced some issues with games in our Steam library currently proving unplayable thanks to the Linux-based OS of the Steam Machines. But new games bought through Steam on the hardware should play just fine. For Apple TV, there have been a few high-profile releases like the exclusive Harmonix title *Beat Sports*, but mostly it's been ports or reimaginings of established mobile games. That said, with the countless mobile games it could draw on, Apple TV has the potential to explode with content very quickly.

IS APPLE TV THE NEW WII?

Where did all the Wii players go? Nintendo's last console was one of the most successful of all time and something tells us that all those gamers didn't all decide to just buy a PS4. The casual crowd just drifted away and it seems plausible that some of the iPhone's gaming fans might find the idea of migrating the likes of *Candy Crush* and *Crossy Road* to TV rather appealing. Unlike the Steam Machines, the new Apple TV has the casual appeal of its iOS roots, plus the less intimidating control method of the Siri Remote.

> "WHERE DID ALL THE WII PLAYERS GO? SOMETHING TELLS US THAT THOSE GAMERS DIDN'T ALL JUST DECIDE TO BUY A PS4"

WHO'S GOT THE BETTER SALES MODEL?

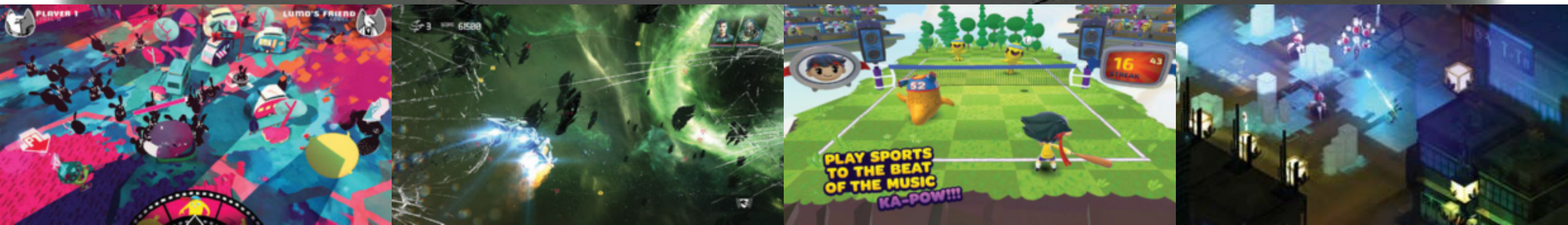
Steam sales or the App Store? Both have very different marketing strategies, but with many iOS games being ported to the Apple TV in various forms the question arises of whether small download prices or even free to play, supported by ads will even work in a TV setting. Will gamers put up with the constant interruptions of ad supported content? It seems unlikely. The regular sales of Steam and the wealth of indie games seems like a more natural fit, but there's not been the exposure in the mainstream for these games yet and a store where prices fluctuate too often may make many of us distrustful of investing money too early in new titles.

WHICH HAS THE BETTER USER EXPERIENCE?

You can't take it away from Apple, it knows how to do user interfaces and the intuitive Siri Remote with its touch pad makes it a pretty amazing and simple UI to navigate. It's perhaps not yet built for managing large game libraries, but that may come with time. The Steam OS is all about getting you to your games and to the store quickly, but the touchpad controls on the Steam controller are not particularly intuitive. In fact navigating the Steam Machines at present feels rather clunky. We would hope and expect this to improve in the coming year.

VS APPLE TV The new battle for your living room

Apple knows good interface design, which may be the key weapon for Apple TV in attracting casual gamers who haven't had a home console since the Wii.





STEVE STOPPS
Founder of Team Lumo

It's the same chip in the Apple TV as is in the iPhone 6; how different is it to develop for?
The architecture is the same, but the performance seems to us to be significantly better than we were getting through the phone chip. We've been able to turn on a lot of the pretty options, but the actual technical work of porting the game across has been relatively straightforward. The hard part is the experiential part. Tower defence games are great on touch screens and that's what *Lumo's Cat* is, but we didn't think that experience was going to cut it on the Apple Remote. The work for us was working out what we wanted that experience to be.

How did you go about developing for and experimenting with the Siri Remote?
It's an interesting one really. We were talking to someone the other day and because it was a controller, they immediately wanted to turn it horizontally into a controller form factor. However, we wanted it to be a relaxed, fun experience so we found that when we first picked up the controller it fits in the hand really nicely. Apple knows how to design hardware. It makes beautiful hardware and when you hold it feels great in the hand.

We know by the time someone gets to playing one of our games they've already worked out how the menus work. They've worked out how the Remote works, so that's why we don't have loads of tutorials in the game.

Finding the right price on mobile has been a challenge. Is that going to be another adjustment with Apple TV?
We used two things in *Lumo's Cat*; one was in-app advertising and you could use in-app advertising on a TV game, but it didn't suit the experience we wanted to make. We didn't want to break the fast-paced rhythm of playing again and again with adverts. I'm sure there are other games that will work great for. In the mobile version we also use what we think of as a fuel mechanic where the game works best if you play two or three levels and then stop. If you want to keep playing you need to buy extra milk or food for your cat. On Apple TV you might play a dozen games back to back because it's really fast-paced and fun, but we didn't want you to stop because you've played too many levels and now you have to go play someone else's game. That's why we opted to do a paid version of the game.

How do you see the battle for the living room playing out with Apple TV for casual gamers, the consoles attempting to break into the multimedia world, and Steam Machines offering a strong indie gaming experience?
I think we're talking about different markets and different human beings. I'll probably upset people, but I don't think that consoles can ever be great media centres, because they're a games console first and foremost. I think consoles are the Hollywood blockbuster space now. If you love those experiences then you're always going to own a console with each generation.

I think Steam's interesting because it gives you that Hollywood blockbuster experience as well as giving you all of the access to all of the 'indie cinema'. The really interesting, quirky indie games and that really super-creative scene that goes on there. But again, I don't think it's mass market, consumer. I think if you realistically look at the numbers I think there are two million people in the world buying those indie games. They're dedicated, hardcore fanatics searching out those indie games, but it's not the billion people in the world that have an iPhone.

Things like Apple TV are mass-market consumer products that everyone who buys one can benefit from the experience, because they can immediately start watching great films.

SCALEBOUND BRINGS THE DRAGONS

Format: Xbox One **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Microsoft Studios
Developer: Platinum Games **Release:** Q4 2016 **Players:** 1-4

Drew and Thuban are bound by life – if one dies, so does the other. Their relationship is the beating heart of **Scalebound**, forming both the central narrative crux and informing a vast array of gameplay mechanics to boot

INTUITIVE NATURE

■ Thuban and Drew's relationship grows deeper as you progress through *Scalebound*, allowing the duo to engage in more unique actions as they begin to understand each other more. Thuban will start to aid Drew more in combat *and* whilst traversing as they gain more intimate knowledge of each other.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

■ Thuban's ability to fly can be a life-saver, even if the dragon isn't directly engaged in combat – say Drew is trying to take down one of those fantasy knight errant enemies that have been revealed so far and gets knocked off a cliff… Thuban will swoop down and save him – and could even take him away from the battlefield if needs be.

DRAGON ARM

■ The arm is more than just an aesthetic thing to make Drew look cool – it also works as a form of UI in and of itself. If Thuban is close to death, the arm will change colour. You can use it to 'scan' enemies on the battlefield, and it can also cast devastating magic attacks on the game's enemies.

WARRIOR'S DANCE

■ The game will have a soundtrack full of licensed music – in a demo we've seen so far, Drew fought a giant praying mantis to the beat of The Prodigy's *Wild Frontier*. There's a *lot* of work from Platinum gone into making the music and the studio's trademark combat sync up – and it feels satisfying, like *DmC* or *Bayonetta*.

A BOY OUT OF PLACE

■ Drew isn't from this world – this lush, green land of Draconis. No, he's from 'our' world, and his presence in this new land is a total mystery to him. Luckily, he's been given the power to use the planet's life force – The Pulse – to his advantage… and it's something that might just keep him alive.

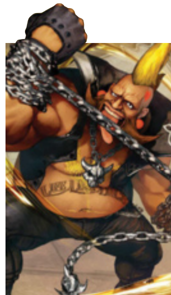
HOW TO CHANGE YOUR DRAGON

■ Thuban can be completely customised – both mechanically and aesthetically. Unlike the majority of Platinum games, *Scalebound* is less about the individual encounter and more about the overall battle capabilities of yourself and your dragon: from dragon armour to tiger-striped scales to a more wyvern-like appearance, there's an impressive scope.

STREET FIGHTER V'S NEW CHALLENGERS

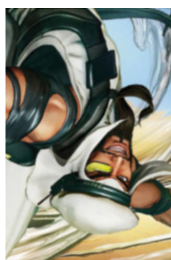
Format: PC, PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** In-House **Release:** 17 February 2016 **Players:** 1-2

With F.A.N.G. and Dhalsim revealed, let's remind ourselves of the other fighters we're going to be wailing on come late February…



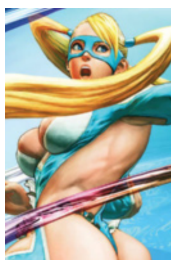
BIRDIE

A hard-hitting power-heavy bogie-flicking monster, Birdie can use his chains for long-range grabs and distance reduction, whilst laying traps around the stage when necessary. He struggles when characters get up close, but his Bull Head move gives you breathing space and has armour – perfect for interrupting potentially devastating start-ups.



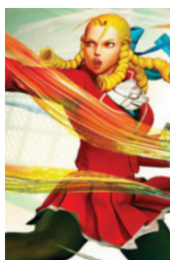
RASHID

With rapid and high-range projectiles, Rashid can force opponents into close range where he can chain quick, nasty pokes into a more damaging aerial combos. His V-Trigger unleashes a huge tornado that comes with a *ridiculous* hitbox – Rashid is an outright pressure character, and will be accessible to players that aren't too clued up on *SF*.



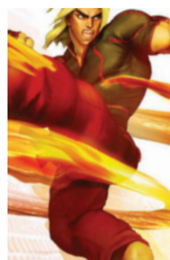
R. MIKA

With a V-Trigger that calls in wrestling partner Nadeshiko, Mika can open up some sneaky back-attacks and command grab mixups, making her a good choice for players that like to get up close with their opponents and play the will-they-won't-they throw game. Command grabs can be charged up, making her a very technical character to get your head around.



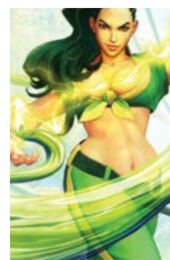
KARIN

Karin's main weapon is her new dash – a move that lets her close distance and follow up with either a throw or a high-low attack that's a real pain to guard against. Do this enough times to build meter and you can unleash her V-Trigger, too, a technique that lets her let rip on opponents with multi-string combos that are variable and totally unpredictable.



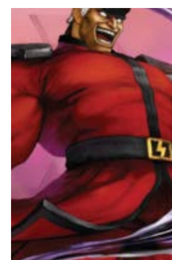
KEN

Returning with a highly modified moveset (which apparently ties into his story in the game), Ken now seems like a good rushdown character. With interesting mix-ups and an EX air move that lets him reset mid combo, Ken has become more than just a dragon-punch spammer for new players to grab a few quick and dirty wins as they begin playing the game.



LAURA

A grappler with a projectile, Laura breaks the archetypes *Street Fighter* usually goes with. Think of her as between Blanka and Elena – she's all about kicking moves and shocking the opponent, with some tactical command grabs high-damage supers. Her projectile travels at different velocities depending on input – making her fairly hard to read.



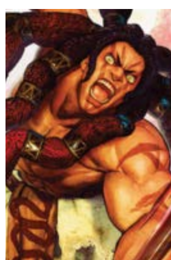
M. BISON

Bison is actually quite a bit weaker than he was in *Street Fighter IV*, but he makes up for it by being able to catch and return projectiles (including Supers!) He's a slow damage dealer, relying on some charge attacks and teleportation to get up close and attack. With Bison, you'll want to pressure the opponent *hard* – getting close is the best way to bring about the end-game.



NASH

In the builds we've played, Nash has the most amount of combo setups from his regular moves, and that makes him a prime choice for intermediate players. He has good mid-range pokes and projectiles and can soak up other character's long-range attacks, to boot. Some of his attacks take a while to start up, but he's got good anti-air to deal with that.



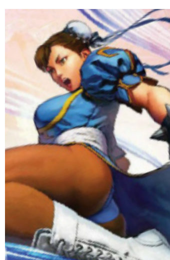
NECALLI

One of *Street Fighter V*'s new characters, Necalli comes off as a brawler that can deal *big* damage with his base attacks, and also comes with a kick that changes direction in mid-air (which makes up for his slow movement). He also has a command grab and a tricky selection of charge moves to get your teeth into. A refreshing new fighter.



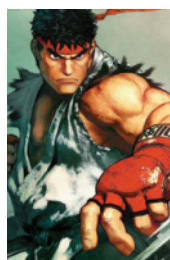
CAMMY

Cammy's Hooligan Roll is her main gimmick - you can use it to feint into low attacks or cut it short with a Canon Strike for a few nasty surprises. Her V-Skill – if timed correctly – can punish an opponent as they get up from a knockdown, dodging attacks and getting behind them for guaranteed combo startups and devastating results.



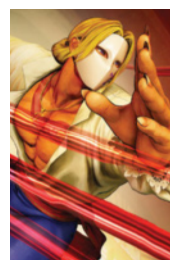
CHUN-LI

With a nice, rapid walk-speed, some quick and accessible pokes and a strong anti-air game, Chun-Li is now so much more than just a spam artist. Her projectile gives her a ranged option, too, making her great for technical players and newcomers alike. As another key legacy character you can expect to see her plenty in early online contests.



RYU

Ryu is one of the few characters that has a parry as a V-Trigger skill, making him a more technical choice for players that love to use mind games on their opponents. He's got some interesting low pokes, too, and can make unblockable (and quick) fireballs with modified super moves. Beginner friendly, as you would expect from this iconic fighter.



VEGA

Vega is *quick*, and can bounce around the screen on a whim, getting in good overhead attacks and sneaky mixups. He has stances, too, which will confuse new players but in the hands of veterans make him responsive to just about any situation the game will throw out. His V-Trigger sets up perfectly for aerial raids on opponents.



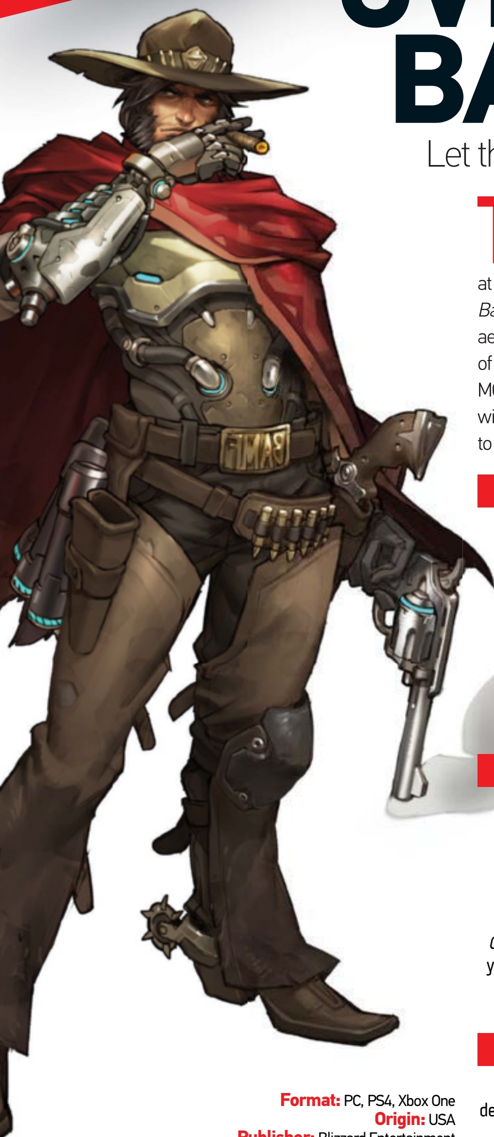
ZANGIEF

Because of his size, Zangief has a fairly slow walk-speed (but that's made up for by his actually decent dash). His standard attacks are varied and have good range, and his grappling supers even have armour, meaning he can get through enemy attacks and projectiles and close distance for high-damage throws even when under pressure.

2016 MOST WANTED

OVERWATCH VS BATTLEBORN

Let the battle for 2016 shooter supremacy begin





The videogame industry works in strange and mysterious ways. How is it that Gearbox, working on its first new IP in six years, and Blizzard, constructing its first in sixteen, have both ended up with titles that – at a passing glance, at least – draw a surprising amount of parallels. Both *Battleborn* and *Overwatch*, respectively, have opted for bright and colourful aesthetic designs. Both titles have pulled focus onto the heroes, instead of the levelling systems, and they too seem to be drawing from the rise of MOBAs to influence the basic game and mode design; integrating it smartly with conventional FPS design. But we've been hands-on with both and look to answer the question: are they really as similar as they seem?

THE GAMEPLAY

■ *Overwatch* might look like it's cribbing from the MOBA format, when in actual fact it has far more in common with the likes of *TimeSplitters* than it does anything else. It's a fast and fluid FPS, with an emphasis on fun, fairness and teamwork; best enjoyed with friends.

■ *Battleborn* still has a little ways to go before Gearbox is able to completely nail down the type of gameplay experience it wants to foster. As it stands, it feels like a less engaging iteration of *Borderlands*' with elements of *League Of Legends*' design thrown in for good measure.

THE HEROES

■ With four classes – fitting into the basic Tank, DPS, Support and Defensive archetypal builds – and 16 playable heroes split between them, it really feels like there is a character for everyone to enjoy in *Overwatch*. It'll take a while to find your preferred character and class, but that's part of the charm.

■ With 25 characters on the roster, you might worry that *Battleborn* would have the capacity to become overwhelming. But in actuality, Gearbox has done a fantastic job with its hero design. Each character we've played as thus far feels fun and unique, not to mention full of personality.

THE MAPS

■ In an era where multiplayer map design is getting more complex every year, Overwatch's back to basics approach is refreshing. Blizzard, by offering limited verticality and by keeping a careful eye on creating kill zones, has created a handful of maps that are simple yet engaging.

■ You've got to hand it to Gearbox; while we have a few concerns with *Battleborn*'s overall intentions, we can't fault the map design. Even at this early stage of development, Gearbox has ensured that the MOBA elements fit nicely alongside standard FPS map design staples.

THE MODES

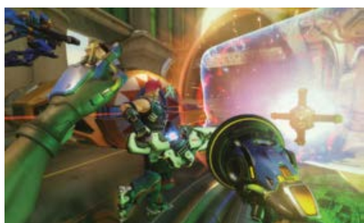
■ Blizzard has been careful to avoid dropping in a standard deathmatch mode, for fear it would work against the core concept, though it needs to do a better job of highlighting objectives. Games routinely fall into kill frenzies, with objective completion usually happening as an accident amongst the chaos.

■ Where *Overwatch* is revelling in a simpler time of FPS design, *Battleborn* is trying to move it forward. The co-op campaign is too slow for our liking, though the objective-based multiplayer modes – which build from basic MOBA AI patterns and three-lane design – have piqued our interest.

FINAL VERDICT

Overwatch and *Battleborn* might share similar animated graphical styles, but that's really where the similarities start and finish. Each game is targeting a different type of FPS fan, though it's too early to tell which will be more successful.

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Developer: In-house
Release: 2016
Players: 1-12





Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Gearbox Software
Release: 3 May 2016
Players: 1-10





2016 MOST WANTED

THE $20 MILLION STORY OF



Format: iOS/Android **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** The Pokémon Company **Developer:** Niantic **Release:** 2016 **Players:** TBA

Google, Nintendo and Niantic's game-changing investment

If this game were a Kickstarter, think of this huge $20 million cash injection as the first hurdle – the money necessary for the project to go ahead. But the campaign isn't over. Oh no – it's just beginning. This was 'Round A', according to Niantic, and Google, The Pokémon Company and Nintendo have all dedicated pretty impressive funds to the cause, and more is coming if the game 'achieves certain milestones'. What these are remain unclear; we assume they revolve around audience retention numbers and gross profit – free-to-play games don't measure themselves on the metrics of traditional releases. It's exciting, though, and it's the closest we're ever going to get to having *Pokémon* in the real world, and that's enough to pique our interest.



I CHOOSE YOU!

Junichi Masuda – who's been directing *Pokémon* games for Game Freak since *Ruby/Sapphire* – will be directly working on the game with Niantic, allaying the fears of those who thought this might not be a particularly 'pure' *Pokémon* game. That said, of all the 721 Pokémon that now exist, the promotional material for this game features only members of the original 151. Does that mean we're going to see various generations phased into *Pokémon GO* as time passes? We actually hope that's the case – it'll keep things fresh.

BIG TEAM BATTLE

One of the most exciting opportunities this game will offer is the ability to team up with a huge group of trainers in the local area and bring down legendary creatures – the likes of Mewtwo, Mew, Zapdos, Articuno and Moltres in the first generation. To do this, every trainer in a certain area wails on the lone Pokémon, and chips away at its single lifebar. If it falls within the time limit, it'd appear we *all* get to keep the legendary. For balancing purposes, that makes little sense, and we're curious to see how *Pokémon GO* actually limits power levels overall anyway – surely if someone just wanders around collecting and catching all day, no other player has a chance? Is the remedy to that introducing some kind of RNG element? We're eager to find out.

GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL

■ The game will revolve around you going out into the wild and finding Pokémon to catch. Using – it would seem – Google Maps technology, the game will be like geocaching lite: head to an area predefined by the game, use your phone or tablet as an AR window and spot the Pokémon. You can team up to bring the monsters down, weaken them and catch them. We just wonder where all the Fire types are going to live…

BE THE VERY BEST

■ Niantic's other famous game – *Ingress* – sees you wandering out into the real world to discover virtual portals and deal with whatever hellish spawn crawls out of them in battle. *Pokémon GO* looks like it'll work the same way, except instead of dealing with portals you'll be facing off random encounters that'll be indicated by a small Pokéball pendant that can attach to your wrist, necklace, backpack or whatever else. These pendants look like Gym Badges – a subtle calling card to other trainers in the real world.

READY FOR BATTLE

■ Aside from the myriad co-operative elements the game will have, there will also be a competitive side where you can battle your captured monsters against local trainers. The lone trailer for the game suggests you'll also be able to team up and take part in double battles, too – exactly how the stats will be calibrated here remains to be seen, we just hope there won't be any sort of pay-to-win mechanic (like buying Rare Candies for 0.69p per item…)

Disclaimer: This is in no way an accurate representation of *Pokémon GO* gameplay.



STARFOX ZERO

■ When it was first announced, fans of this space shooter were disappointed with how it looked: despite being developed with Platinum (the king of action games), the gameplay and graphics were deemed underwhelming. Luckily, the graphics will be improved – but at the cost of delaying the game until early 2016.



SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI X FIRE EMBLEM

■ Not officially named in the West, the Japanese title for this is *Genei Ibun Roku #FE*. It takes the most popular elements of both – the strategy of *Fire Emblem* and the hell-worlds of *MegaTen*. And as Atlus progresses further into Western mainstream, we're seeing more *Persona* elements appear in its other games.



TLOZ TWILIGHT PRINCESS HD

■ Nintendo has shipped over 9 million amiibo in the US alone, so the announcement of *Twilight Princess HD* with a Wolf Link amiibo is bound to have given some of the more hardcore collectors palpitations. The macabre story and setting of this game, with the beautifully cel-shaded art direction, will look great on the Wii U's HD.



UNRAVEL

■ We need a new *Limbo* for this gen, right? *Unravel* promises that – a lush-looking side-scrolling action platformer with nice physics gimmicks and a lovable protagonist made of yarn. Inspired by rural Sweden, *Unravel* has the potential to be the most 'feel-good' game of next year.

2016 MOST WANTED

THE BIG NAMES RETURN

What can we expect from the triple-A behemoths in the coming year?



PES 2017

Developer: PES Productions **Release:** September 2016

Konami finally got its act together in 2015. *PES 2016* wasn't just an incremental improvement on what we've come to expect from *Pro Evolution Soccer*, but a massive statement of intent. The rivalry with *FIFA* hasn't been this fierce since the PS2 era, and we can only expect this to continue into the New Year. But Konami still has a lot of work to do; if it really wants to compete with FIFA on and off the pitch, the publisher needs to work harder at getting patches and integral updates into the hands of players quicker.



CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS 2

Developer: Infinity Ward **Release:** November 2016

When creative strategist Robert Bowling exited Infinity Ward in 2012, he put the departure down to the studio doing "too much 'pew pew' not enough new new." We got a look at what he meant with the release of *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* – a solid, yet unspectacular next-gen debut for the franchise. Infinity Ward will have had three years to work on a follow up, and it needs to showcase the same creative spark that once put it on the map with *Modern Warfare* back in '08 if it wants any chance of standing shoulder to shoulder with Sledgehammer and Treyarch.



FORZA HORIZON 3

Developer: Playground Games **Release:** August 2016

Another year, and yes, that means another *Forza Horizon*. With *Project Gotham Racing* dead and buried, Microsoft has turned to Playground Games to deliver an arcade racer to Xbox every other year – trading places with Turn 10's simulation release under the *Forza* branding. Playground has already come close to perfecting its mechanics and systems, and now we'd expect the studio to push the console to reach a 1080p/60fps performance benchmark; not to mention introduce an array of varied locations.



FIFA 17

Developer: EA Sports **Release:** September 2016

It become inherently clear that EA Sports is in desperate need of a break from the annual release grind with *FIFA 16*. A solid release, but we're starting to worry that EA's proprietary Ignite Engine might not be up to the task of taking the beautiful game to the next level. The same old complaints still crop up, from dodgy keeper AI to problems with the midfield battle – and we aren't sure if *FIFA 17* will be enough to save it from the return of *PES*. Ultimate Team and Season interfaces need to be overhauled; as do many of the core systems.



NEED FOR SPEED

Developer: Ghost Games **Release:** November 2016

You've got to feel a little for Ghost Games; after taking an extra year of development time to try and return *Need For Speed* to greatness, the studio ended up putting out one of the most disappointing entries in the franchise's history to date. If EA wants to try again in 2016 – which it will, lord knows it won't let that engine go to waste – then it needs to re-establish what made it great to begin with. Always online was a mistake, as was the lack of speed – come on, Ghost Games, the road to success is in the name.



BATTLEFIELD 5

Developer: DICE **Release:** October 2016

EA has already gone as far as confirming that the next *Battlefield* game will release in the last quarter of 2016 and that it will be "military themed", so now it's just a waiting game until the hype train starts to pull out of the station. But DICE has a lot to think about with (what will probably be) *Battlefield 5* following the catastrophic release of *Battlefield 4* and the complaints levied at *Star Wars Battlefront*'s content-light launch and questionable Season Pass plans. *Call Of Duty* could stumble in 2016, and DICE needs to be on top of its game to respond.



MINECRAFT

Developer: Mojang **Release:** July 2016

September will mark the second year anniversary of Microsoft purchasing the *Minecraft* IP rights, and it's about time it did something grand with it. Collaborating with Telltale on *Minecraft: Story Mode* aside, Microsoft has been more than happy to let *Minecraft* trudge along doing its thing; but you don't spend 2.5 billion dollars on a franchise and not use it to help sell consoles. If we were to place an educated guess, we would expect to see Mojang announce a massive *Minecraft* expansion in 2016 with timed availability on Xbox One. That and a fresh look at the incredible HoloLens demo.



DESTINY 2

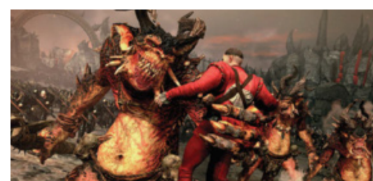
Developer: Bungie **Release:** September 2016

While Bungie's release schedule got a little waylaid by the original 2013 delays, it now looks like it's back on track. *The Taken King* marked the beginning of *Destiny*'s second year in action with an array of sweeping core-gameplay changes, and we expect Bungie will capitalise on this towards the end of 2016 with a full priced and (hopefully) content-complete *Destiny 2*. This was always the plan; and will kick start a cycle that will see an expansion on the scale of *The Taken King* arrive the following year, and so on for the next ten years.



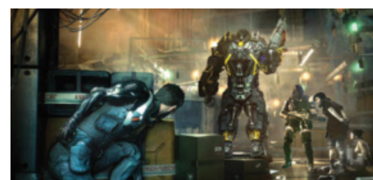
ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED

While *Far Cry Primal* is stealing this indie game's thunder just a tad, the Ubisoft sandbox can't offer the breadth of dinosaur riding or MMO features that *Ark* can. It's the perfect mix of open world and insanity with a multiplayer twist for some extra spice.



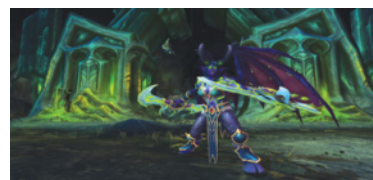
TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

We don't care how nerdy it makes us, we're excited by this game. Any Creative Assembly RTS is worth paying attention to and one set in the Warhammer universe makes perfect sense, preorder bonus playable class controversy aside.



DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

Not long after we chatted with Eidos Montreal last issue about its upcoming cyberpunk opus, it decided to delay the game several months into August. Using its own engine and with a complex story to unravel the extra time can only be a good thing.



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: LEGION

WOW subscribers may be dropping, but this remains the most popular MMO out there and with a movie on the way in 2016 it's no surprise that Blizzard would look to capitalise on the exposure and keep this epic party running a little while longer.



XCOM 2

PC exclusivity has meant we've seen a little less interest from some quarters in this strategy staple, but we're interested to see what the extra focus that might bring will add to what was already an excellent game in *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*.

3 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MIRROR'S EDGE CATALYST

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Sweden **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** DICE **Release:** 26 May 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

A quick info drop on DICE's latest parkour adventure

TINKERING TAKES TIME

1 DICE pushed back the release of *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* from February to May with senior producer Sara Jansson stating it would give the team time to make the game "as entertaining, impressive, and memorable as it can be." If we had to guess, we'd say that traversal might remain the toughest challenge for the team, particularly when combined with combat.

SLOW-MO WARNING

2 When Faith is in serious trouble, the game will kick into slow motion, giving you a moment to save yourself by getting a better look at the incoming fire and dodging the bullets that are flying at you. It sounds like a bit of a superpower, but then again, Faith can also be made impervious to attack if she's running really fast, so it all fits with the gameplay logic of the world.

THINK VERTICALLY

3 Many of the secrets of *Catalyst*, and the developer promises plenty, will be hidden off the beaten path of the game and will need some hunting to uncover. But this is a much larger and more varied city than the original game so you'll need to think vertically in order to find things. Climb up buildings and find safe places to drop to and you may discover something cool.







HITMAN'S PLANS BEGIN TO TAKE SHAPE

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Denmark **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** IO Interactive **Release:** 11 March 2016 **Players:** 1

New locations and release explained

IO has been releasing some important intel on its newest Agent 47 outing in recent months, as well as holding the game back into 2016 to allow a little more development time. A smart move as far as we're concerned, as it takes it into a quieter release period and may give players a chance to get a grasp of exactly what they're paying for.

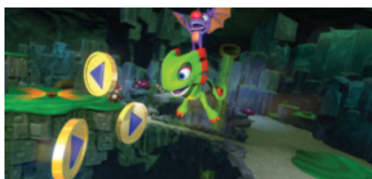
Hitman will be launching with its Paris, Sapienza, and Marrakech levels as previously detailed, each with hundreds of NPCs, plenty of replay value and the ability to set up and play other people's contract missions in each too. After launch, we'll get additional locations, starting in April with a mission somewhere in Thailand. May will take us to the US, and in June we'll visit Japan.

The game will be released as a full-priced game up front, which will automatically unlock the new content as it's released, or a Starter Pack version will be available that you can upgrade later. We're still not entirely sure this way of releasing the game will appeal to everyone, but we like aspects of it very much, such as the way it will allow IO to adapt to feedback on the opening missions for later content. Plus the core game is looking very good right now.



THE WITNESS

What does this luscious, but seemingly abandoned island have to show us that we must bear witness to exactly? Lots and lots of puzzles is the answer and we don't have long to wait before we can finally enjoy Jonathan Blow's latest creation. We're terribly excited.



YOOKA-LAYLEE

2016 could be a great year for 3D platformers as *Ratchet & Clank* gets rebooted and the original *Banjo-Kazooie* team reinvent the genre with this new double act. Expect bright colours, quirky humour and a ton of collectibles to eat into your gaming time.



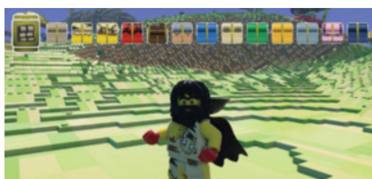
CUPHEAD

There are flashier games coming to Xbox One through ID@Xbox, but *Cuphead* remains standard-bearer in our minds with its superb art style and imaginative adaption of 1930s animation techniques. It might be the best-looking game of the year.



DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

After the incredible *Divinity* and another successful Kickstarter campaign it appears *Divinity 2* has found its audience again and is going from strength to strength. This is oldschool-style gameplay with modern tech behind it – excellent stuff.



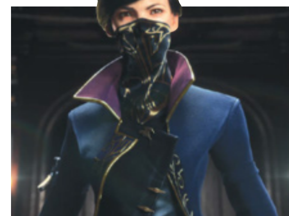
LEGO WORLDS

The *Minecraft* competitor is still in its beta phase now, but you can expect it to explode in the coming year. With all of the crafting potential of Mojang's game, plus the draw of its blocky characters, *LEGO Worlds* may be the last game some will need play.



While **Dishonored 2** has two playable characters, Arkane has already confirmed that co-op is out of the question.

DISHONORED 2 IS IN FOR THE KILL



Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One **Origin:** France **Publisher:** Bethesda Softworks **Developer:** Arkane Studios **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1

The fate of the Isles hangs in the balance

It's all change in the Isles

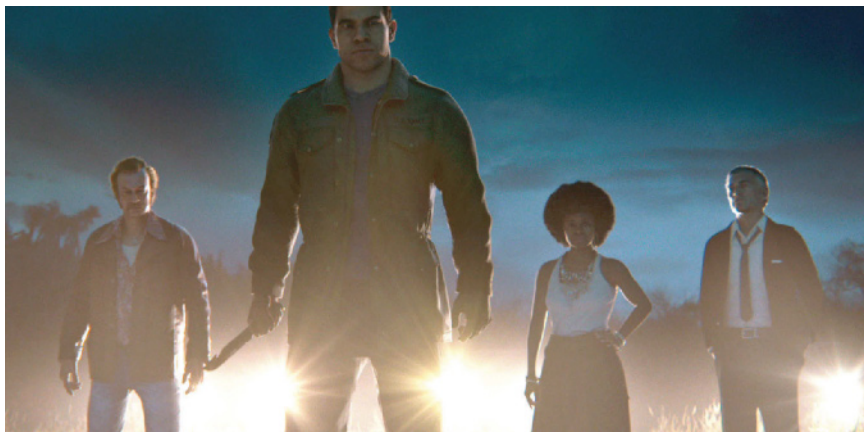
Say hello to an all-new coastal settlement called Karnaca; *Dishonored 2* is taking us on a tour of the Isles. 15 years after The Dunwall Plague, the sequel will see the Empire plunged into chaos as Empress Emily Kaldwin – the young princess from the original – is overthrown.

Two playable characters, double the murder fun

Corvo Attano is back, and won't be alone in his attempts to usurp another otherworldly force; *Dishonored 2* will see him joined by a playable Emily Kaldwin, now boasting a murderous array of assassination powers of her own.

You can play how you want to

Once again, there's the option to play stealthily or violently, and yes, you can still finish the game without killing anybody. Plus, you'll be able to switch between both characters between missions, each offering a unique perspective, and no longer will the coolest powers be locked away from those with non-violent intentions. The Chaos system is also likely to be redesigned, as your decisions will not only impact the world, but will "ripple across the years," if the Outsider is to be believed, anyway. Arkane's new Void engine (based on id Tech 6) is being used, so expect sweeping changes to its look, too.



MAFIA III'S DARK HEROES

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** 2K Games **Developer:** Hanger 13 **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1

The devil is in the details

LINCOLN CLAY

The antihero of *Mafia III*, Lincoln Clay is a Vietnam war veteran who finds comfort in the Black Mob outfit of New Orleans. A hit from the Italian Mob on his new family sends Lincoln, and us, on a war for revenge that will likely be very bloody.

CASSANDRA

As leader of the Haitian gang, Cassandra is after the area that crime boss Sal Marcano commands, and joins in a reluctant truce with Clay to overthrow the brutal Italian's rule. Assign her territory appropriately; crossing her would be bad for business.

BURKE

Burke is a dreamer, in the sense that he would love to be running the entire city. Sadly, he doesn't have the temperament. He's a hot-headed Irishman, leader of one of the most brutal gangs in the city, and he's on your side, for a price of course. Watch your back.

VITO

A face only a mother – and a few million gamers – could love. *Mafia II* protagonist Vito returns, but his reasons for leaving Empire City and dropping into New Orleans remain unknown. One thing we know; he wants a bigger piece of the crime pie.

UNDERSTANDING **QUANTUM BREAK'S** INSANITY

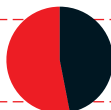
Format: Xbox One **Origin:** Finland **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** Remedy Games **Release:** 5 April 2016 **Players:** 1

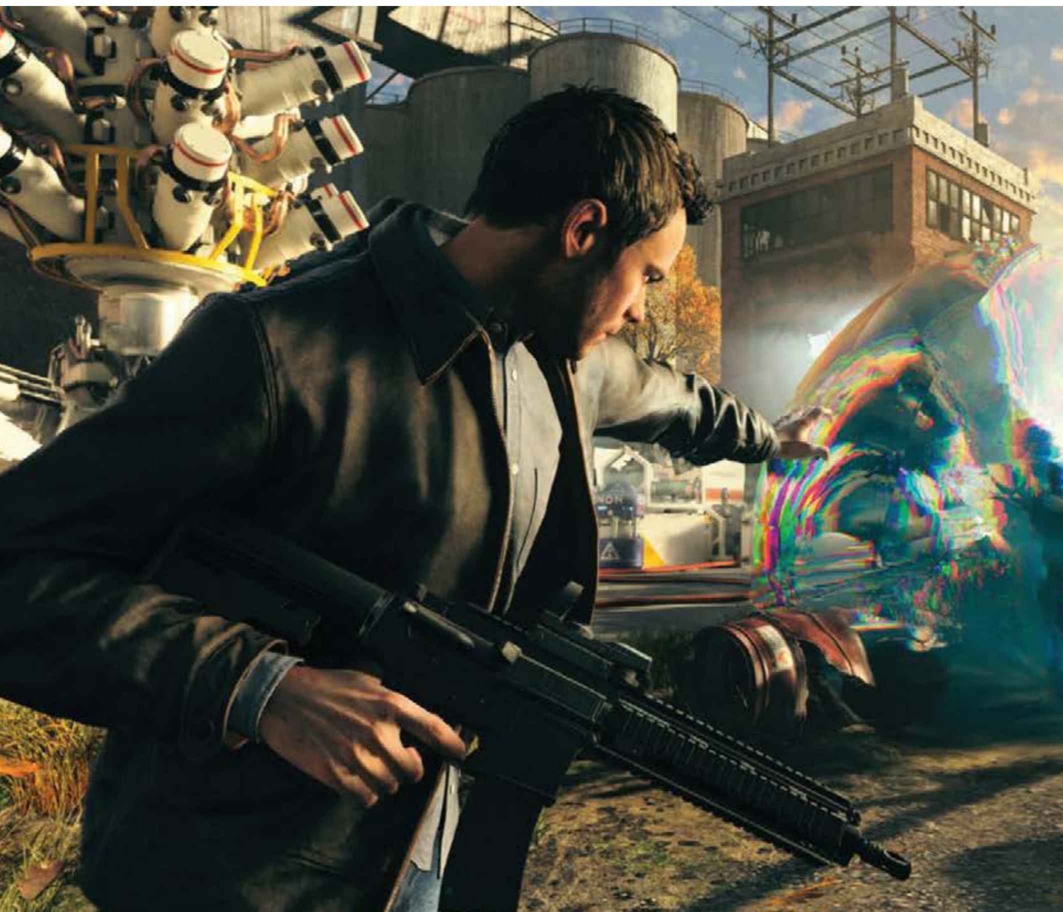
Remedy explains how one of 2016's most ambitious packages actually works

"*Quantum Break* is an intense story-driven, action game spectacle. At River Port University, a time travel experiment goes horribly wrong and time starts to break down. Jack Joyce, our hero, is caught in the blast of the failed experiment where he gains the power to manipulate time. He is fighting to stop the end of time, and time is literally running out." As one of Microsoft's biggest exclusives in 2016, we've heard the pitch from Remedy's creative director Sam Lake more times than we care to count, and we're convinced it will have the same potency as *Alan Wake* and *Max Payne* before it. What we aren't so sure of, however, is the risky transmedia venture Remedy is undertaking, which sees the studio attempting to intertwine an on-disc live-action TV show into the DNA of the game. Wondering how it'll work? **games™** went behind the scenes with Remedy's Thomas Puha to get the details…



HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT QUANTUM BREAK'S LIVE-ACTION EPISODES?





WHAT'S THE POINT OF THE LIVE ACTION SHOW?

■ "The game focuses on the heroes, but the in-game live action show focuses on what goes on in the enemy camp, inside Monarch Solutions," says Thomas Puha, the head of marketing at Remedy. He claims it will be "a rather unique opportunity for the players to see both sides of the story."

HOW DOES THE SHOW WORK WITH THE GAME?

■ "You play an act of the game [and] at the end of each act you get to play a Junction Moment with the story's villain Paul Serene. He can see alternative timelines… you get to decide which future comes to pass. [That] is followed by an episode of the live action show, which is customised based on your Junction Choice."

HOW MANY EPISODES WILL THERE BE?

■ "[Each episode is] approximately 20-22 minutes [in length] with four episodes in total. There are five acts of the game itself [and] while some of the changes are subtle, some are drastic – like a character dying. It's the player who gets to make these choices that impact the live action show as well as the game."

AREN'T THESE JUST EXTENDED CUTSCENES?

■ "It is important to understand that the live action episodes are not cutscenes – all of our cinematics are created live with our North Light game engine on Xbox One, [while] the live action show has been handled by Lifeboat Productions. Combining the game and the show has been a huge undertaking, as they share locations, characters and events."

CAN YOU SKIP THE LIVE ACTION SHOW?

■ "Once you've unlocked an episode you can skip it and keep playing, but to get the most out of the experience and have the greatest understanding of the world of *Quantum Break* we recommend following the intended flow. The full experience is available on one disc so, of course we'll make sure that you can watch the unlocked episodes later if you wish."

2016 MOST WANTED

INDIE DEVELOPER ROUND TABLE

We sat down with developers of four of 2016's most exciting indie games to get their take on the state of the scene and industry at large

What do you think of the current publishing landscape for indie games?

Guillaume Provost: Still one hundred times better than in the retail era! Although it is true the market has gotten a lot more crowded this year, people sometimes forget that we used to have to package boxes and send them to retail stores to sell games.

Raphael van Lierop: It's pretty incredible. There are a host of independent developers out there that wouldn't exist today if not for the range of low-barrier digital platforms like Steam, and the respective stores on Xbox and Playstation. Mobile games are in a worse position, but things on PC feel very robust. Looking at today's landscape in comparison to the options available to independent developers ten or even five years ago – getting a game to market as an independent developer has never been so viable.

Steve Gaynor: I think that it's interesting how we're seeing how stuff that started in earnest five years ago is reaching its logical conclusion. Steam really started to have a focus on indie games and Steam was the place to get your indie game seen because the barrier to entry was so low. It's just interesting to see how now there's an amazing flood of small independent games on Steam, because of Greenlight and Kickstarter and all of these things that started to allow more people to make games like that and get them to that service. We've also seen how now indie games on console platforms are really kind of a given. They're part of the identity of those platforms now in a way that feels integral rather than just 'look at this new crazy thing'.

> "I THINK THE MAIN DIFFERENCE THIS YEAR WILL BE VR. THERE'S A LOT OF BUZZ AROUND IT BUT NO BUSINESS MODEL YET"

Chris Remo: There are publishing options if you're really small-scale and you're looking to get the money to bring to completion a concept that you've already proven out, or if you're fairly large-scale and are willing to give away a fair amount of creative or financial control. The middle is the toughest place to be, which feels like a mirror of larger-scale triple-A development as well. In the current market, the impulse is either to bet big on likely hits, or bet small on low-risk projects that might luck out and hit big anyway.

What are the challenges you expect indie game developers are likely to face in the coming year?

RVL: I'm not sure the coming year will be any different from previous ones, in terms of the challenges we face. Making great experiences, finding our audience, keeping them engaged. That's what we're all working hard to do. I think the main difference this year will be VR. There's a lot of buzz around it but no business model yet. I suspect a lot of money will be spent and lost on trying to secure the first-mover's advantage in search of the "killer app".

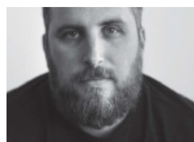
SG: I think that part of the ebb and flow of the indie games market is actually based on the console generation. In the early years of a console generation I think you have these really big splashes, like *Destiny* being an early title this generation, and just really big games that justify your purchase of this new hardware. If anything, I imagine 2016 might be the year where part of that trend starts to lighten up and people are looking for more kinds of different games they haven't played before. It might be a really good time for indie game releases compared to the first year or two of a new console being out.

CR: Probably the main challenge indie game developers will face in the coming year, and in all the years after that, will continue to be the challenge of keeping the lights on.

Concerns have been raised over the sustainability of indies after Steam sales data became more public. Do you subscribe to the idea that 'the indie bubble is bursting'?

GP: The bubble isn't bursting… games have always been this way: few winners, and many losers. We're just seeing it more clearly with SteamSpy. The more saturated the market becomes, the more polarized the market tends to get; and we've seen it happen on mobile. People will stop just buying opportunistically and start flocking towards what their friends like instead. But you can still sell a small game for $5 or a huge game for $60; and I think that allows for a lot more diversity in the types of games that can be successful in the space.

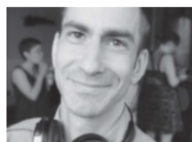
RVL: Not so much a bubble bursting as a reality check. I think Steam is a bellwether for what's happening to the industry in general due to the unrelenting shift to digital. Steam is the Netflix of



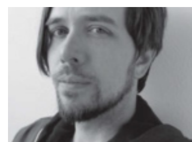
RAPHAEL VAN LIEROP
Founder and creative director
Hinterland Studios
CREDITS
Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine
Far Cry 3
Company of Heroes
Dawn of War



CHRIS REMO
Developer, composer and writer
Campo Santo
CREDITS
The Cave
Spacebase DF-9
Gone Home



GUILLAUME PROVOST
Founder and creative director
Compulsion Games
CREDITS
Contrast
Full Auto
Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale
Pariah



STEVE GAYNOR
Co-founder, writer and lead designer
Fullbright
CREDITS
Gone Home
BioShock Infinite
BioShock 2
F.E.A.R.: Perseus Mandate

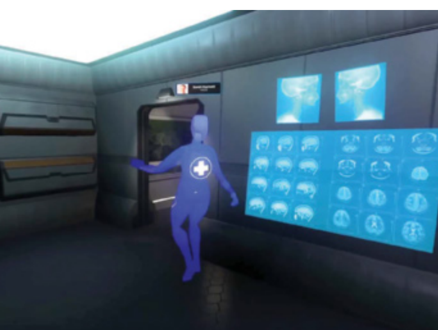


■ *Firewatch* is looking to bring an interesting and unfolding story with very simple communication through a walkie-talkie as you stumble upon untoward activities in the forest.



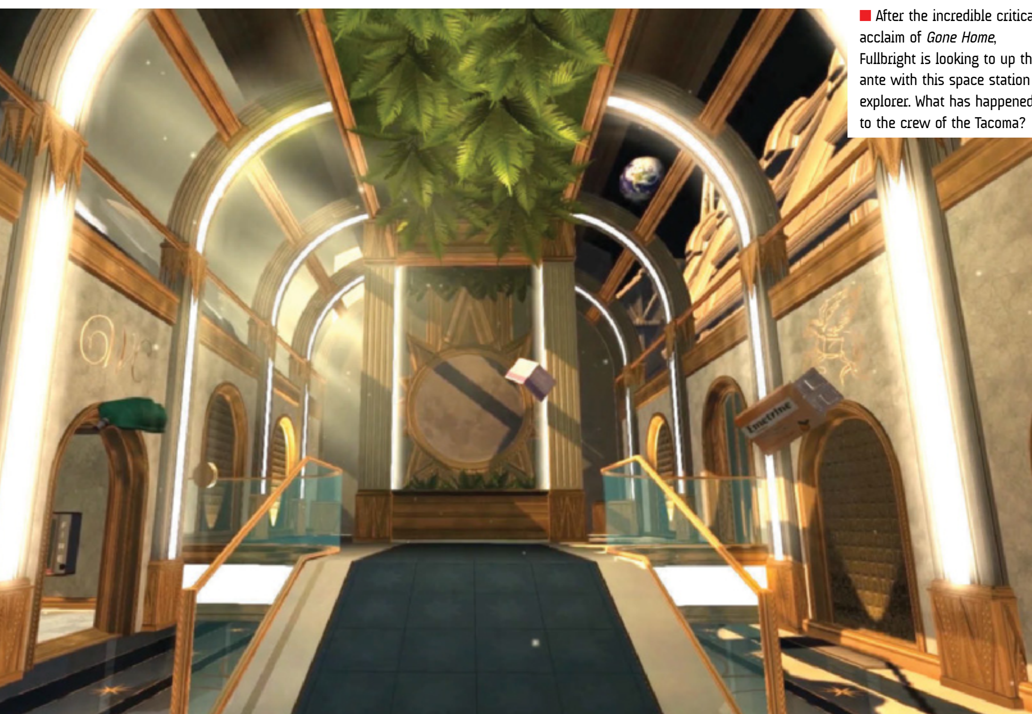
■ Famous graphic artist Olly Moss is the man behind the art style of *Firewatch*, which might explain why some of its vistas look so stunning. It's a visual treat.







■ Once again, *Tacoma* is about gradually unveiling and unfolding the story through audio logs, although on this space station you'll get to see holograms play out as well.



■ After the incredible critical acclaim of *Gone Home*, Fullbright is looking to up the ante with this space station explorer. What has happened to the crew of the Tacoma?

games, in the sense that it's an alternate distribution platform that's shifted the focus from relationships with the gatekeepers (publishers) to relationships with the community (i.e. people who are passionate about your content and willing to pay for it), and as a result has opened up markets to new types of content.

Player expectations are also rising and the lines between independent and "triple-A" are blurring, as far as the quality of the player experience, but in general the calculus remains the same as it always has – make more money than you spend, keep doing that.

SG: The Steam audience is continuing to grow, but at any given time there's only so much money going into the system to go out to developers. I think that it does feel as if it's being distributed over more developers now than it used to be and I think that's a good thing. It sounds more healthy to me overall. In a weird socio-economic analogy, it's good for all of the wealth not to be concentrated in one percent of the games that are being released.

I think Valve is aware of that. Valve is very much a market economics focused organisation. It runs Steam like a self-contained free market that it pulls the levers over, which means it can adjust and regulate its own market. I think that's what we're seeing now with this year's holiday sales, it's only doing one discount for the whole thing and it's choosing who gets featured. I don't really have any inside information here, but I think it's a method of trying to rebalance away from the race to the bottom of mega discount culture.

CR: Very few of the people who would like to make a living by independently developing games actually end up being able to, and whether you're one who gets to do it doesn't have to do entirely with talent. Talent helps, but – like any creative field – it's such a matter of circumstance and luck. I don't think that will change soon. Usually, when new business models and technologies are introduced, there's a bit of a gold rush that happens when both creators and the public get excited. But then eventually they settle down and reach an equilibrium, which might be favourable to creators and might not be, depending on lots of details.

How do you measure the success of an indie game?

SG: From my point of view, we've always wanted our games to do well enough that we can make another game based on how well they do. If you lose money on your game then that's a problem because there is only so long that you can keep doing this if the game is not going to actually sell. But there's always the other side, and I think this is true in big games as well as indie games, of how much does it connect with people?

How much does it connect with an audience in a way that is unique? You can have a game that does however well it does commercially, financially, etc, but if it really makes a connection with an audience that cares about it and they find something special in it that they haven't been able to find anywhere else and you can tell from their reaction that you've made something that matters to somebody, I think that's the aspect of the success of a game that's more important to your soul, I guess [laughs].

RVL: Community engagement is the first measure of success. Are your players happy with the experience? »

THEIR GAMES IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We asked each of these game-makers what they wanted you to know about their new titles

TACOMA



■ Steve Gaynor: With *Gone Home*, it was really our goal to test a hypothesis, which was that we could take our experience working on the *BioShock* series and see if a game like that, if it were at a smaller scale, could be sustained entirely by the part of those games that is exploring the environment and finding audio diaries and finding environmental story telling.

The next step for us is that we've proven to ourselves that we have that toolset and that we can sustain an experience using those experiential building blocks, and so I think and hope that people will find *Tacoma* interesting as an exploration forward into what else we can do with that and how we can tell a different kind of story, with a different set of aesthetic goals using those tools and expanding on those tools as a base.

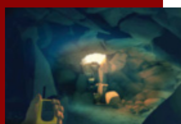
We're having a lot of fun, but it's new challenges and it's exciting to work our way through them and I hope that when people play *Tacoma* they'll feel like we've expanded on what we did with *Gone Home* in a legitimate, interesting new way. That's our goal. And it's on a space station, so if you like space games, we got that. It's got holograms! It's got zero-G! That's what I meant to say earlier: play our game, it's on a space station. It's cool!

THE LONG DARK



■ Raphael van Lierop: We just want them to know that we're working hard to create something special with *The Long Dark*. We've learned a lot through our experience on Early Access, and we're excited to shift into the next phase of the game's existence by launching our episodic Story Mode. We have a lot more game to build, a lot of stories we want to tell in this world, and we hope to live up to our fans' expectations as well as create something compelling enough to draw new people into the experience. For us, this game is a long-term commitment and we're excited to see what the future holds for our fans and for this IP.

FIREWATCH



■ Chris Remo: *Firewatch* will be amazing and you should definitely buy a copy for yourself and all your friends. It is a game that, if we're successful in our goals, will be entertaining throughout but will also respect your intelligence, just like the first sentence in this answer didn't.

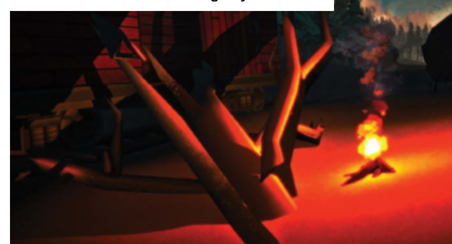
WE HAPPY FEW



■ Guillaume Provost: It's our second game, and it's the studio's blooming period. We've attracted some really amazing industry talent to come work with us on *We Happy Few*, and that makes it one of the most exciting projects of my career.

■ The modular nature of *The Long Dark* means that it's a game that could be expanding and developing long after its full release. Its Early Access incarnation has already seen major developments.





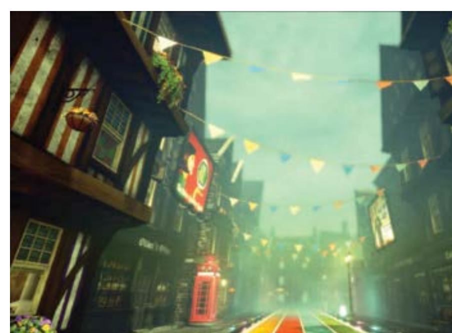
■ *The Long Dark* is much more of a pure survival experience than some you might see. You need to manage your calories, warmth and thirst as well as other resources to survive as long as you can.

■ An interesting element to your challenge to escape the dystopian town of *We Happy Few* is that the world is procedurally-generated each time you begin and there's no saving progress. If you die, that's it and it's a brand new game.



■ We've been keeping a close eye on *We Happy Few* for some time, not least thanks to a dark, deep foreboding element to the world Compulsion has created that reminds us a lot of *BioShock*.





» Are they investing time in your game? Are they sharing it with their friends? Are they encouraging strangers to give your game a try? Steam reviews are a good indicator of this engagement, as is interaction on social media, forums, and of course, presence on YouTube and Twitch. Beyond community engagement, you're measuring success by sales and revenue. Success means you make enough money to take risks and still plan a future for your team and studio. That's all most independent developers want.

CR: It depends what kind of success you need. For most indies, financial success means being able to make another game, ideally without outside investment. That's our goal, certainly, even though we've had a great experience with our funding partner, Panic. On top of financial success, creative success for me would be defined by having really interesting pieces of criticism published about our game.

Obviously, I hope the game is reviewed well, but what's more exciting to me personally is the idea of the game prompting thoughtful and unique writing and responses, whether or not they're purely positive.

GP: I'm not sure what the definition of "indie" is anymore; but the reason many of us are independent is because we want to try new and different projects that we feel passionate about. So to that extent that developers are pushing the boundaries, narrative, gameplay or the type of games coming to the market, and seeing enough commercial success doing it to keep doing it are "successful". The more diversity in game experiences we can bring to the market, the wider our audience will be over time.

With third-party publishing and larger studios, are the lines between indie games and 'regular' games becoming blurred? What's the delineation in your mind; what's the difference to you?

GP: I think independent developers are getting crowded, and that is pushing some developers to get bigger and to create products that will encroach in the traditional triple-A market. There's still a pretty large gap in scope however, between – say – *Outlast* and *GTA V*. What we're seeing from some independents is a shorter, more focused triple-A experience. Personally, I like the formula. I think there's a large segment of gamers who have a limited amount of time to play games, and who prefer to experience different games with that time.

RVL: I think the term "indie" is confusing and I'm not sure what it really means. It used to refer to an aesthetic. Then it meant you weren't publisher-owned. I think people use the term to suggest, interchangeably, a genre as well as a scope, and some sense of the creator's voice coming through clearly in the work.

In that paradigm, I think games from independent studios that are self-funded, or funded outside the traditional system (whether it be Kickstarter or Early Access or whatever), are all "indie", regardless of the kind of experience they deliver. In other words, "indie" isn't a size but a state of mind. I think it means you are close to your community and you have more freedom to pursue your own creative sensibilities. Profit and product are not your primary goals, and you aren't beholding to shareholders.

I don't think "indie" means you're making a certain type of experience, although I think certain types of experiences tend to be made by studios we consider to be "indie". There's causality there.

SG: My overall view is that it's pretty straight-forward in that an indie game is something that isn't published or released or owned by a publisher. There are definitely small games coming from small teams within Ubisoft or whoever, but it would be a stretch to say that *Child Of Light* was an indie game, because it was from inside this multinational organisation.

I'm in no way trying to denigrate the game or the experience itself, but I think there is something meaningful about a game having come from a studio that was independently-funded. That we're doing this with our own money or investment from individual groups and we're making this happen outside of the shell of a larger organisation.

CR: If anything, the lines between the studios themselves are getting less blurred. Triple-A development is becoming more massive by the year, and it's hard for me to imagine anyone confusing that with most indies. Even the largest indies are pretty easy to distinguish from a typical major publisher-owned studio. I think blurring might be occurring in player perception of the games, largely because the potential scale and ambition of independent games has become disproportionate to their developers' team sizes.

As a player, if you compare *No Man's Sky* and *Assassin's Creed*, depending on what features are most exciting to you, it might not be obvious why one of those games requires only a dozen people to make and the other one requires some number of hundreds that I've lost track of at this point. While the kind of people reading this interview are probably aware of the distinction, I bet it's safe to assume that most people buying games have absolutely no idea whether what they're playing is made by ten people or a hundred or a thousand.

"GAME DEVELOPERS LOVE TO GRIPE ABOUT ALL THE PROBLEMS WITH LARGE-SCALE DEVELOPMENT AND HOW WASTEFUL IT IS"

Do you think young developers getting into gaming would be better served starting in indie development or getting experience at a large studio?

CR: It is never possible to give advice about getting into games that will apply across the board. But if I had to make a call, all else being equal, I would say it's probably better to get experience at a large studio first. You'll learn a lot of institutional and team practices that are harder to learn on a very small team when you have much more responsibility out of the gate and there isn't a lot of time or room for training or easing into roles. You can always translate the experiences you've had on large teams into your small-team work. Game developers love to gripe about all the problems with large-scale development and how wasteful it is, and there's some truth to that, but most indies I know who are successful and consistent came out of large-scale development and learned important lessons from it.

GP: I think they're better off starting with independents; even if it's less sexy. It's harder, you'll learn faster and you'll touch many other disciplines very quickly and be given more responsibility. So – as a developer starting out, it's a great way to accelerate your career. On the flipside, it also pays less, has less security, and it can sometimes be harder to control the quality of the projects you work on, especially if the studio's management isn't capable of mustering the funds and organisational skills to bring great games to market. When looking for jobs, I always chose people first, projects second and conditions last.

RVL: I think young developers getting into the industry are best served making something. There are certainly valuable lessons to be learned working at larger studios – mainly, teamwork, worth ethic, and learning how to collaborate within groups. But those lessons can be gained in a variety of ways. I know that I lean on my years of hard-won experience in the "triple-A" industry, every day. I don't think I'd trade those years for anything, because if not for them, I wouldn't be where I am today.

SG: It's really hard for me not to just speak from my own personal experience because I spent a lot of years at larger studios and I learnt a lot. Half of Fullbright now are people who worked at 2K Marin. My year at Irrational was an invaluable experience for me. But everything you do is an expression of the experience that you've had. So, I'm really glad that I had the kind of experience that I did before we tried to make a game like *Gone Home*.

There are certainly developers like Derek Yu [*Spelunky*] or Edmund McMillen [*Super Meat Boy*] who just came up by making small games in the indie space for years and years before they honed that into a major hit. I think there are certainly still advantages to coming up through big studios. It's basically on-the-job training, a paycheck and you make contacts with lots of people who you work with at the studio and other studios. On the other side of it, it means that you're going to be working on somebody else's game for a long time and it can be a real challenge to bring your own heart to that and remain invested and get the most you can out of that. Because a lot of it is luck of the draw.

I'm very lucky that I got to work at places that were a good match for me and allowed me to explore what I was capable of before I went out on my own.

2016 MOST WANTED

JANUARY

7-10 Jan
Smite World Championship
Atlanta, Georgia

6-9 Jan
CES 2016
Las Vegas, Nevada

Jan
Another World
(25 years)

Jan
Neverwinter Nights
(25 years)

22 Jan
Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam (3DS)

22-24 Jan
DreamHack Leipzig
Leipzig, Germany

26 Jan
The Witness
(PC, PS4)

26 Jan
Lego Marvel's Avengers
(Multi)

29-31 Jan
PAX South
San Antonio, Texas

29-31 Jan
Global Game Jam

FEBRUARY

Feb Defender
35 years

5 Feb
Paper Mario
15 years

5 Feb
XCOM 2
PC

6 Feb
Street Fighter II
(25 years)

9 Feb
Firewatch
PS4, PC

13 Feb
MCM Midlands Comic Con
Telford, England

14 Feb
Lemmings
25 years

16 Feb
Street Fighter V
PS4, PC

16-18 Feb
DICE Summit
Las Vegas, Nevada

21 Feb
The Legend Of Zelda
30 years

23 Feb
Far Cry Primal
Multi

27 Feb
Pokémon Red/Green
20 years

MARCH

4 Mar
The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess HD
Wii U

5 Mar
Conker's Bad Fur Day
(15 years)

8 Mar
Tom Clancy's The Division
Multi

9 Mar
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter
10 years

11 Mar
Hitman
Multi

11-20 Mar
SXSW Gaming Expo
Austin, Texas

14-18 Mar
GDC 2016
San Francisco, California

18 Mar
Uncharted 4: A Thief's End
PS4

20 Mar
TES IV: Oblivion
10 years

22 Mar
Resident Evil
20 years

25-27 Mar
WonderCon 2016
Los Angeles, California

25-28 Mar
Insomnia57
Birmingham, England

APRIL

2-3 Apr
Games [4Diversity] Jam 2016
Netherlands

5 Apr
Quantum Break
Xbox One

7-9 Apr
EGX Rezzed 2016
London, England

17 Apr
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey
10 years

22-24 Apr
PAX East Boston, Massachusetts

22 Apr
Star Fox Zero
Wii U

22-24 Apr
DreamHack Bucharest
Bucharest, Romania

28 Apr
Total War: Warhammer PC

MAY

6-8 May
DreamHack Austin
Austin, Texas

14-16 May
LVL UP Expo
Las Vegas, Nevada

22 May
Red Faction
15 years

24 May
Metal Slug
20 years

24 May
Mirror's Edge Catalyst
Multi

27-29 May
MCM London Comic Con
London, England

30 May
Hitman: Blood Money
10 years

JUNE

10 Jun
Ark: Survival Evolved
Multi

14-16 Jun
E3 2016
Los Angeles, California

18 Jun
Twisted Metal: Black
15 years

18-21 Jun
DreamHack Summer
Jönköping, Sweden

24 Jun
No Man's Sky
PS4, PC

22 Jun
Quake
20 years

25-26 Jun
MCM Belfast Comic Con
Belfast, Northern Ireland

23 Jun
Super Mario 64 20 years
Nintendo 64 20 years
Sonic The Hedgehog
25 years

Events | Tournaments | Anniversaries | Game release dates

JULY

- 2-3 Jul – MCM Ireland Comic Con – Dublin, Ireland
- 9 Jul – Donkey Kong – 35 years
- 12-14 Jul – Develop: Brighton – Brighton, England
- 13-15 Jul – Playful Learning – Manchester, England
- 15-17 Jul – EVO Championship Series – Las Vegas, Nevada
- 19 Jul – Final Fantasy X – 15 years; Final Fantasy IV – 25 years
- 21-24 Jul – San Diego Comic Con International – San Diego, California
- 23 Jul – Max Payne – 15 years

AUGUST

- 4-7 Aug – QuakeCon 2016 – Dallas, Texas
- 6 Aug – Metroid – 30 years
- 17-21 Aug – Gamescom 2016 – Cologne, Germany
- 23 Aug – Deus Ex: Mankind Divided – Multi
- 23 Aug – Devil May Cry 15 years; Super Mario World [US] 25 years; SNES [US] 25 years
- 26-29 Aug – Insomnia58 – Birmingham, England
- 29 Aug – Saints Row – 10 years
- 31 Aug – Crash Bandicoot – 20 years

SEPTEMBER

- Sep – Galaga – 35 years
- 10 Sep – Advance Wars – 15 years
- 14 Sep – Luigi's Mansion – 15 years
- 15-18 Sep – Tokyo Game Show – Tokyo, Japan
- 16 Sep – PES 2017 – Multi
- 19 Sep – Okami – 10 years
- 20 Sep – Out Run – 30 years
- 22 Sep – Just Cause – 10 years
- 23 Sep – FIFA 17 – Multi
- 24 Sep – Silent Hill 2 – 15 years
- 24 Sep – Ico – 15 years
- 24-25 Sep – MCM Scotland Comic Con – Glasgow, Scotland
- 26 Sep – Castlevania – 30 years

OCTOBER

- 7 Oct – Yooka-Laylee – Multi
- 10 Oct – God Hand – 10 years
- 15 Oct – Pokémon Blue – 20 years
- 17 Oct – Bully – 10 years
- 21 Oct – Assassin's Creed – Multi
- 22 Oct – Grand Theft Auto III – 15 years
- 26 Oct – Pikmin – 15 years

NOVEMBER

- 1 Nov – Burnout – 15 years
- 7 Nov – Gears Of War – 10 years
- 11 Nov – Call Of Duty – Multi
- 12 Nov – MGS2: Sons Of Liberty – 15 years
- 15 Nov – Halo: Combat Evolved 15 years; Tomb Raider 20 years
- 19 Nov – The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess 10 years; Wii Sports 10 years
- 21 Nov – Super Smash Bros. Melee 15 years; The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past 25 years
- 22 Nov – Rainbow Six: Vegas – 10 years
- 23 Nov – Tamagotchi – 20 years
- 26 Nov – Dead Or Alive – 20 years
- 24-27 Nov – DreamHack Winter – Jönköping, Sweden

DECEMBER

- 9 Dec – Divinity: Original Sin 2 – PC
- 8-12 Dec – Insomnia59 – Birmingham, England
- 16 Dec – Sid Meier's Civilization – 25 years
- 19 Dec – Kid Icarus – 30 years

WHY I ♥...

ANOTHER WORLD

JONATHAN JACQUES-BELLETÊTE, EXECUTIVE ART DIRECTOR, EIDOS MONTREAL

[Working on] something like Deus Ex *I have to say* Out Of This World *(or* Another World *as it was known in Europe) is a game I love. I think it's just the most atmospheric game probably ever made. It's like an instruction manual on how to create a world, how to create atmosphere and even how to create emotion. With very, very simple gameplay at the same time and very simple mechanics. I go back to that game all the time. And even the visuals back then… For most people it looked like crappy visuals, but it was actually an aesthetic that was way ahead of its time.* Another World *is one of my biggest inspirations.*





“I think it’s just the most atmospheric game probably ever made”

JONATHAN JACQUES-BELLETÊTE, EXECUTIVE ART DIRECTOR, EIDOS MONTREAL

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Reviews



78

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

We find out whether the force is truly strong with DICE's relaunch of this classic FPS franchise



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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ALL THE EXTRA CONTENT IN THE WORLD WOULDN'T MAKE BATTLEFRONT'S IDENTITY CRISIS ANY MORE PALATABLE

SHAKE HIM? I CAN'T SEE HIM…

Endor is probably the most visually arresting environment in the game, and the maps that are set on the green planet are among *Battlefront*'s finest. What taints Endor is the way in which the rebels have been rendered. In order to stay true to *Return Of The Jedi*, they're all kitted out in green and brown camouflage gear, and are thus obviously at a massive advantage against an army of bright white Stormtroopers. But the extent to which the rebels blend into the background borders on the absurd. During games of Blast in particular, you'll need to get used to being killed by enemies crouching beside a tree who are almost literally invisible. Can this even be fixed? We have our doubts.





IT AIN'T LIKE DUSTING CROPS, FARM BOY

Star Wars Battlefront

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Playstation 4
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: DICE
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-40
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: Hard as it is to resist them, plumping for anything other than X-Wings and Tie Fighters during matches of Fighter Squadron always pays off. The alternative A-Wing and Tie Interceptor aren't as distinct during combat, so you're more likely to be left alone.

On the surface, comparing *Battlefront* to *Battlefield* is a completely meaningless endeavour. Despite arriving courtesy of the same hugely talented studio, *Battlefront: 2015 Edition* militantly stays true to its duo of prequels, which is to say that it's fundamentally rather uncomplicated. Despite the presence of a few borrowed (and simplified) systems, approximating *Battlefield*'s fearsome complexity was never on anyone's agenda, and yet it's been far too easy for some critics (and fans) to criticise *Battlefront* for what it isn't, rather than celebrate it for what it is.

At its most confident, this is one of the shrewdest movie licences in history: a beautifully-rendered action romp through the most beloved science fiction property of all time. Many of the series' most iconic sights and sounds are present and correct, and it's difficult not to be spurred on when, during the final stretch of a match, as your team approaches victory, a reworked blast of John Williams' seminal score envelopes the soundtrack to give your team a little morale boost. Even if you aren't a rabid obsessive, the myriad crafty ways in which the game adheres to the look and feel of the original trilogy is exciting in itself.

But even more so than its predecessors, this is a game that desperately wants to appeal to everybody, which is where the water starts to get muddy. Objective-based multiplayer games need systems of strategy to underpin them, and *Battlefront*'s comprehensive lack of strategic options and preferences make for an experience that's only capable of delivering excitement in brisk, potent bursts. Prolonged play is exhausting, with any and all searches for gameplay depth coming up empty. You cannot deny the quality of what's here, but it's hard not to ask the question that so many others have been asking since launch: is this it?

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BAD PARTY: The game's party system is backwards. You can party up before a match, but you then have to press a button to confirm matchmaking. If you miss it? You're out.

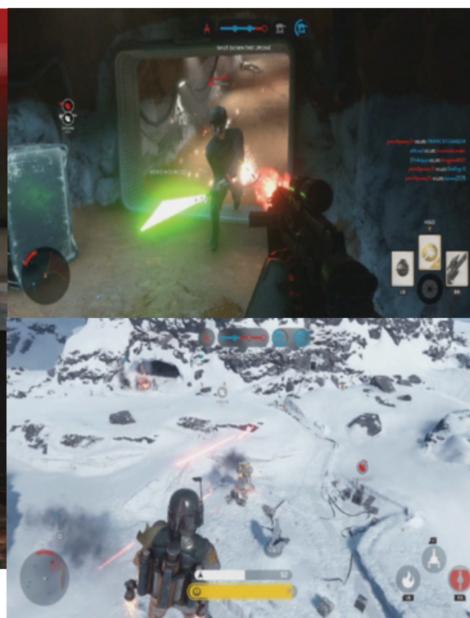
That hollow feeling isn't a result of what's not included on the disc either. That argument, about whether there's a sufficient amount of content available before you have to start shelling out for DLC, is always going to split people down the middle. To our minds, *Battlefront* doesn't feel lacking in content at all: the four Walker Assault/Supremacy maps are so vast that they'll take weeks (and probably months) to fully explore, and a pre-Christmas fifth map is being provided free of charge. The smaller game types utilise twelve environments in total (fourteen if you count the free DLC) which is at least three more maps than most multiplayer shooters tend to launch with nowadays.

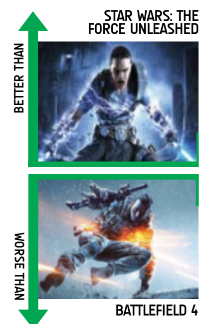
The number of gameplay modes on offer – nine, with a tenth provided at no extra cost – is uncommonly generous too; battles of various sizes at various different shades of intensity, all designed to ensure that there's something here for everyone. And yet all the extra content in the world wouldn't make *Battlefront*'s identity crisis any more palatable. It's a mindless and none-more-accessible blast that's been closely modelled on one of the most vigorously convoluted action franchises in videogame history, in the mad belief that such a fusion were even possible. When it works, it's exhilarating. When it doesn't, perseverance feels completely futile.

For all that's wrong with it, *Battlefront*'s marquee mode is also its most consistently exciting. Walker Assault not only precisely mimics the chaos of large-scale *Battlefield* to thrilling effect, but also offers the broadest variety of things to do. Partially reminiscent of *Battlefield*'s Rush, Walker Assault asks a defending team of rebels to protect against an AT-AT onslaught by keeping jammer uplinks online for as long as possible, before play eventually moves to a subsequent set of objectives. The longer each pair of uplinks is



Above: Galactic Conquest, *Battlefront*'s flagship gametype of old, isn't here yet. Like arguably too many other things, it's likely to be added later via DLC.





Left: On close inspection, the vehicle and hero tokens actually spawn in the same locations during every match. This means that dedicated pilots or sabersmiths can camp on them and wait until they appear; somewhat tarnishing the game's accessibility factor.

kept online, the more bombing passes your (AI controlled) A-Wings are given, and the longer your troops have to attack the AT-ATs from the ground. Buried deep within the chaos are your best opportunities to properly strategise, and if you populate an in-game party to its (somewhat pointless) eight player maximum, you are able to coordinate the defence or attack of each and every uplink station in the game simply by communicating a little bit.

But if you aren't communicating with a team, almost all of your tactical choices are based on luck. Rather than being skill or points-based, every power-up and vehicle in the game takes the form of a randomised battleground pick-up. The coolest tech isn't reserved for players dedicated enough to constantly land absurdly high kill streaks; anybody can enter a game of Walker Assault and leave feeling that they've seen everything. Blunt as it may be, as a way of democratising an uncompromising genre, it's a tack that's very difficult to argue with, although the fact that all areas of play haven't been treated in the same fashion is easily the most bewildering aspect of the whole enterprise.

Air vehicles are the most intimidating part of any *Battlefield* game, and they're also the most intimidating part of *Battlefront* for no good reason. Player control of the AT-AT's all-powerful weapons is restricted to 60-second long bursts, which is an ingenious way of curbing the kind of exploitation that was possible when pros took control of the circling gunship in *Battlefield 3*. Why air vehicles weren't treated in a similar manner is a genuine mystery, because *Battlefront*'s air battles are exactly the same as *Battlefield*'s air battles: highly ranked players perpetually spawn-trapping enemy craft the moment they appear, with leaderboard after leaderboard telling an identical story. Thirty-plus kills, no deaths.

Much to the studio's discredit, DICE has always pandered to the kind of *Battlefield* players who want to rule the heavens without ever once being shot down, so it'll be interesting to see whether *Battlefront*'s skies become a less imperious place a patch or two down the line. By way of comparison, control of heroes like Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader isn't timed either, but there are several clear-cut ways of defeating (or severely damaging) even the most proficient VIP in combat. The exception to this rule comes in the form of the endlessly evasive and overpowered Boba Fett; but given the community's very vocal outrage at launch, you can expect the Mandalorian bounty hunter's stats to diminish imminently.

But *Battlefront*'s biggest problem is that its biggest problems can't be patched at all. The 20v20 game types – and importantly, their gigantic maps – are so draining because even if you're experienced, you can sprint towards an objective for the best part of thirty seconds, only to suddenly get sniped or shot in the back. This is certainly an issue for *Battlefield* too, but it's an issue that's alleviated by its squad spawning system, by the inclusion of medics and spawn beacons, and by the inclusion of innumerable vehicles both armoured and un-armoured. Your only hope for absolution in *Battlefront* involves the wishy-washy Partner spawn system, pinched wholesale from the forgettable *Medal of Honor: Warfighter,* which incidentally had a class system that included medics. For some reason the Partner system only ever works intermittently here, regardless of where your companion is on the field, and whether or not they are in combat.

So, disappointingly, it's on the smaller modes and maps that *Battlefront* ends up truly shining. Blast offers a no-nonsense round of traditional TDM; with predictably peerless map design and (mostly) fine-tuned weaponry, it soars. Fighter Squadron looks like the most disposable mode, but actually turns out to be the most plainly enjoyable; a straightforward ruck between X-Wings and Tie Fighters, the anarchy allayed by the presence of countless bots. Cargo is a CTF variant in which there are only ever ten pieces of the titular contraband, which means that play invigoratingly ping-pongs between stealth attack runs and siege-style bursts of defence. Droid Run is Domination except the capture points move around on you (a great idea), while Drop Zone, playable in the beta, is a fairly standard capture and defend

FAQs

Q. ARE THERE SPACE BATTLES?
Sadly not. All aerial combat takes place in the skies above the four planets. Expect DLC to remedy that.

Q. IS THERE SPLIT-SCREEN?
Yes, but only for Survival Mode and Battle Mode; namely the offline, non-competitive stuff.

Q. IS DARTH MAUL IN IT?
No, thank god. The core game is solely focused on the original trilogy. One DLC pack will almost certainly feature that character though.



Right: Although John Williams' themes are everywhere, all of the music in the game has been smartly tweaked by a musician named Gordy Haab.



Right: Some of the kit pick-ups, like the Rocket Launcher and Thermal Imploder, are brilliant. Others, like the stationary turret, are so weak and hard to control (in addition to offering no added protection) that sensible players just immediately dump them.

WHEN IT WORKS, IT'S EXHILARATING. WHEN IT DOESN'T, PERSEVERANCE FEELS COMPLETELY FUTILE

Below: Despite being accessible to almost everyone in the beta, the highly valuable jetpack isn't unlocked until you hit level 13. Save up for it.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



The tutorials are brilliantly evocative of the original films, but why are they so short? This all feels like *Star Wars* though, which is both welcome and impressive.

5 HOURS



The smaller, tighter gameplay modes are starting to appeal more and more, but the lack of depth is worrying. Has this thing got legs? It's difficult to tell at this point…

14 DAYS

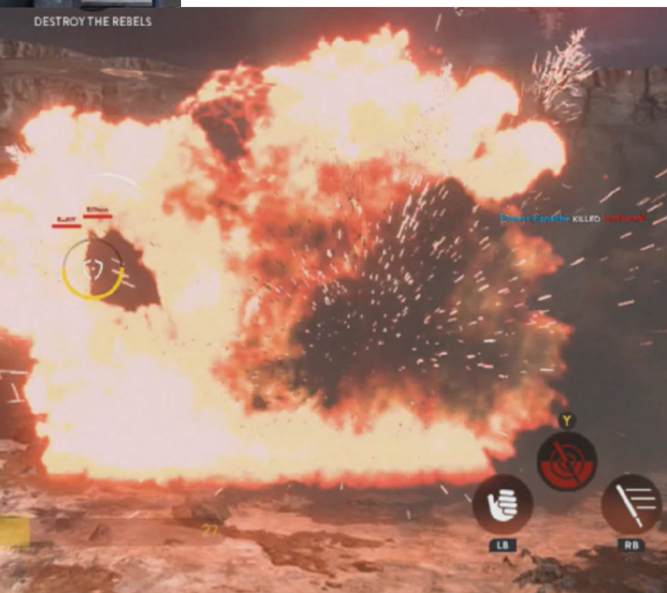


Battlefront's lack of depth is now patently obvious, and it's difficult to play it for longer than an hour at a time. Despite this, every one of those initial hours is utterly delectable.



NOT FOR KIDS?

If anything is more confusing than *Battlefront*'s retrograde attitude towards air vehicles, it's the game's surprising PEGI 16 certificate. Needless to say the game is completely bereft of bloodshed, and the fantasy violence pales in comparison with what you see in many young adult movies these days. In short, it's pure PG. "Violence consists mainly of players using guns and lightsabers against enemy forces, who fall down limply when struck, though there is never any blood or visible injury," explained a tweet from PEGI. "Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine can also choke or electrocute their enemies, causing them to realistically struggle, writhe and yell in pain." Is *Battlefront* really more violent than *Revenge Of The Sith*, the first *Star Wars* film to receive a 12A certificate? The view from here? No way.



gametype, enhanced immeasurably by the lightning quick respawns.

The crowd-pleasing duo of hero-based modes are less successful, but will improve as the core of *Battlefront* evolves. Heroes and Villains has Luke, Leia and Solo facing off against Vader, Boba Fett and Senator Palpatine who, hilariously, has a melee attack that looks like it was borrowed from a flamboyant WWE purebred. The problem (at present) is that two blasters always trump one, and if you're clever, Solo and Leia's blasters can keep Vadar and Palpatine's melee-centric attacks at bay with disarming ease. That Leia can spawn a shield (and health pick-ups!) in near-perpetuity is the annoying icing on the irritation cake.

Heroes and Villains is currently more likely to descend into a game of hide and seek than anything else, which would be less frustrating if stalemates didn't leave you rematching over and over again (potentially forever) until someone wins. Hero Hunt, in which control of each new hero is awarded to the previous hero's killer, is presently too exasperating to be enjoyed: a lone wolf single-player mode that mystifyingly allows friends to join together, it's an experience that's all but ruined by a community furiously chasing Achievements and Trophies.

The lack of a single-player campaign was made public early and is no bad thing in a game of this kind, but the smattering of co-op modes on offer are routine and flippant. Despite allowing you to relive a few epochal scenes from the original trilogy (the Endor speeder bike chase, the Hoth tow cable takedown) you can complete all of them in less than half an hour. Survival Mode is one of the most drab and standardised iterations of Horde in history, with slow-moving waves, enemies who endlessly run and hide, locked loadouts and cheap one-hit kills on the harder difficulties. It's empty, box-ticking tedium.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

NO CHOICE: *Battlefront* has dedicated servers but no server browser, which means that it's currently far too easy to get stuck in frustrating low-ping matches. Hopefully the feature is added later.

It turns out that, so befuddled is *Star Wars Battlefront*, that simply celebrating it for what it is feels dishonest. It's an extraordinary mess of brilliant ideas melded with utterly harebrained ones; of thoughtful and charming fan service doing battle against a piledriving Palpatine and idiotic dialogue that sounds like it was recorded in a toilet. That so much of it works beautifully is no accident, but it's hard to shake the feeling that more people are going to be confused or bemused by *Battlefront* than are going to passionately love it. It's a project that flits so consistently between being a five out of ten game and a nine out of ten game, that this review was only ever going to end on one number.

VERDICT

PRETTY EMPTY, BUT DAMN HARD TO RESIST

7 — gamesTMmag scored **7** for Star Wars Battlefront

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

IT'S GETTING BORING BY THE SEA

Just Cause 3

Just Cause 3 feels a hangover from a gluttonous, bygone era of Hollywood action entertainment. It's an open-world adventure that brazenly refuses to implement any lessons that have been learned in the last five years. It's the sequel to a game that successfully inspired a generation of whiney YouTube-montage makers who became obsessed with twisting a sublime physics engine in an otherwise soulless environment in order to terrorise the unsuspecting locales of a tropical island paradise. The resulting experience, *Just Cause 3,* is a game that never quite extends its ambitions past the Cool Guys Don't Look At Explosions meme.

Except, of course, you will look at explosions. You will look at twenty-plus hours worth of explosions until your retinas have burned to a crisp and you'd better like it too, because there's little else to do of any weight or worth in Avalanche's magnificent, sprawling open world. It's difficult to actually comprehend the lingering disappointment because *Just Cause 3* should be the most ridiculously exciting game ever put into our hands. In many ways, it's the purest distillation of videogames out there. Blow everything to hell, shoot guns until your fingers are sore and damn the consequences; all the while the back of your mind desperately goads you with the all-important question: "Are we having fun yet"? *Just Cause 3* gleefully hands you the keys to a sandbox full of gorgeous oceans to soar over, some towns to be conquered and lands to be exploited with thunderous ferocity, but it expects you to do it with the most rudimentary tools and systems imaginable.

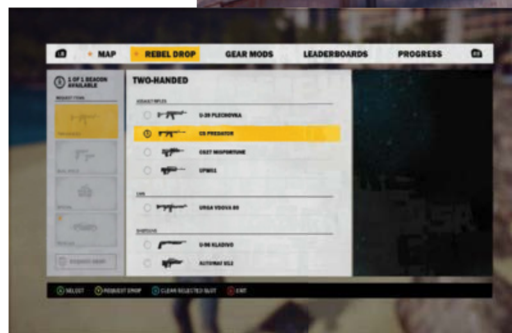
The fundamentals just aren't there to prop up an entire triple-A open-world experience. The controls are finicky, enemy AI are painfully basic, the gameplay loop is weak and the gunplay is devoid of the weight (or rhythm) that we've come to appreciate and expect from modern action games. Each of these basic elements has been seemingly overlooked

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS PS4, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Avalanche Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

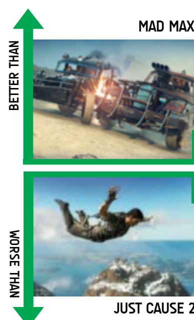


Below: Frustratingly, you need to pause out of the action and head into the menu to do everything from look at the map, find objectives, request weapons or tinker with mods. It breaks the immersion terribly and frequently.





BETTER THAN — MAD MAX



WORSE THAN — JUST CAUSE 2



FOR A GAME THAT SO HEAVILY ENCOURAGES THE USE OF IMAGINATION, IT'S DISAPPOINTINGLY BEREFT OF IT ITSELF

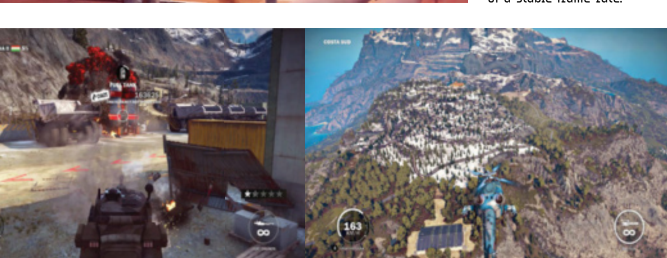




Left: Avalanche would have done well to implement some of the good combat systems used in *Mad Max*, as it's disappointingly weak in *Just Cause 3*.



Left: While *Just Cause 3* looks fantastic, it also suffers from an array of technical limitations. We'd have much rather seen Avalanche dial back the physics engine or scale down explosions in favour of a stable frame-rate.



FAQs

Q. WHERE'S MULTIPLAYER?
Just Cause 3 is strictly (and strangely) for solo players only, but the game does track everything you do in the game and compare it to players worldwide.

Q. IS IT WELL IMPLEMENTED?
If your idea of a well-implemented system is to have the right side of the screen constantly assaulted with notifications, then sure!

Q. WHAT IF MY INTERNET IS BAD?
Then expect the game to freeze when the connection drops and then spend minutes trying to reconnect every time you want to open the map.

through development, making *Just Cause 3* more limited than it really should be. They feel like secondary elements to *Just Cause 3*'s redeeming fun factors: the explosions and, of course, the great wingsuit, parachute and grappling hook combination.

At times, it can be an almost transcendent experience. Scaling a snowy mountain, using your grappling hook to inch closer and closer to the peak. Then you swing the camera around you, taking in the gorgeous views before making a leap of faith. The air whips past you, colours begin to blur into a haze of Dreamcast-block blues, reds and purples as you plummet to the ground, finally deploying your wingsuit and majestically soaring through the skies with speed. It's exhilarating, twirling through the environment and it's that thrill that keeps the game alive during even its dullest moments. *Just Cause 3*'s improved locomotion and electric portrayal of flight almost makes up for its other, much more numerous failings. *Almost.*

It's at this point that you deploy your parachute, whip out a rocket launcher and blast everything with wanton aggression. Things will explode, the frame-rate will stutter sickeningly and a laundry list of objectives to secure a settlement will begin to check off until fireworks signal completion. Topple a statue, create some chaos, tear down a few billboards and raise the flag – now do this ad nauseam until the tropical Medici is liberated. You have to work for your fun in *Just Cause 3*.

In spite of its playful demeanour and irreverent tone, your fun with the game will greatly depend on your willingness to be constantly delighted by combining the basic systems with *Just Cause 3*'s (admittedly impressive) physics system. As in the previous games, your grappling hook can fire out a tether, linking two objects together. Where this would automatically pull the two objects together – be it a train to a plane or anything to an object tinged in red – you now have the ability to manually increase the tension on the tethers and cause objects to collide at your discretion, for often amusing results. You'll spend a lot of your time attaching things to other things to see what the result is. It's fun for a while, but there's only so many times you can watch a fuel tanker topple onto a helicopter tethered to a wall before it becomes as monotonous as chasing yet another prestige in *Call Of Duty*.

Just Cause 3 does a pretty great job of keeping the lack of substance hidden behind great spectacle. The explosions are impressive, truly impressive, and they make it easy to forget the problems, even if it's just for a fleeting few seconds. However, for a game that so heavily encourages the use of imagination, it's disappointingly bereft of it itself. Outside of liberating settlements, you can try you hand at the story – an inane journey with a collection exhausting stereotypes – or you can complete time trial challenges to get access to Rico's coolest toys and upgrades. Locking the upgrades away might have increased the longevity, but it also means you'll increase your time battling against mediocrity before the real fun begins. It's only once you have everything at your disposal that you can truly begin to overlook the numerous flaws and start having fun framing the perfect screenshots and videos.

The lasting memories of *Just Cause 3* will be the small moments where everything comes together to make the most insignificant action feel like a unique event. The fact that all of the mechanics work together so seamlessly is impressive, but the magic is fleeting.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TETHERED TOGETHER – You have control over the chaos with multiple tethers and tension control, letting you dictate how and when objects collide.

TECHNICALLY IMPERFECT

Just Cause 3 might be one of the most beautiful open-world games we've ever seen – it's bursting with colour, while the sense of scale is truly wonderful – but it's marred by an array of technical problems. These range from simple annoyances to game-breaking failures in design. The frame-rate has a tendency to crawl during moments of ridiculous number-crunching physics-warping action. Load times between respawns and missions can often take in excess of ten minutes to complete, while environmental clipping and pop-in are constant annoyances. This is especially poor on Xbox One, though slightly improved on PC and PS4. It's truly disappointing how little care has been put into *Just Cause 3*.

VERDICT
FUN IN SMALL BURSTS, BUT OVERWHELMINGLY MEDIOCRE

6
gamesTMmag scored **6** for
Just Cause 3
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



CLASSIC TACTICAL SHOOTER REGENERATES FOR THE CLASS OF 2015

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege

It's been seven long years since the counter-terrorist crusaders of *Rainbow Six* last graced our lives, and while the *Tom Clancy* name has been clear and present in the interim, there's an almost giddy excitement having the series that put the Clancy brand on the map back in rotation. So is *Siege*, the tenth and latest addition to the series the true successor to that mantle? Is it still the thinking gamer's shooter of choice?

Well, yes – but it's not a throne inherited without compromise. From the moment you begin exploring its menus, the classic *Rainbow Six* DNA is certainly still there – planning your assault on a hostage-filled or bomb-rigged locale; tense shootouts with no health regen or extra lives and enough tactical options to shake Kevlar fist at. But that DNA has been consciously diluted down to make it fit the shooter template of today.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-10
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Gone are the protracted planning stages before each siege, dropped in favour of two quick recons of a given consulate or household with a two wheeled RC camera. Out are the memorable campaign missions, cut by the team to make way for a multiplayer-only setup. What you're left with is a game that invokes the spirit of classics such as *Raven Shield* or *Vegas*, but one that now takes more cues from faster FPS' a la *Left 4 Dead* or *Counter-Strike*.

These are sacrifices, make no mistake, but they're entirely necessary. *Rainbow Six* has always boiled down to teamwork and communication, and *Siege* takes this mantra and tunes everything to amplify it. This is a shooter built for a mic'd up party – using sticky cameras to track enemy movement, guiding team members around a map to reinforce certain objectives. Even in death, you can flick between wall-mounted lens to keep your remaining squad mates informed.

WHEN IT ALL COMES TOGETHER, SIEGE'S UNIQUE BRAND OF GAMEPLAY SINGS LIKE NO OTHER SHOOTER

This does make it a very different experience if you're playing with a bunch of silent randoms. Even with a familiarity with its maps under your hat, it's easy to walk straight into an ambush without a squad to back you up. Add this to the destructibility of the environments (most surfaces can be destroyed, but also reinforced, creating a pleasing on-the-fly approach to breaching a given room) and you'll find yourself being picked off through cleverly-positioned holes and tagged and hunted down by player-controlled drones. It might sound alienating, but join a cohesive squad and everything just clicks.

FAQs

Q. CAN YOU PLAY TERROHUNT WITH BOTS?
Nope, it's either with other players or as a Lone Wolf.

Q. ANY BLOOD ON THE MENU?
Yes! Kills spray the walls in glorious Technicolour.

Q. IS THERE A SEASON PASS?
There is, and it'll give you early access to even more content.



Below: It's sad to see the single-player content of *Siege* so shallow – especially when you consider how much noise Ubi made at E3 with the reveal that TV actress Angela Bassett would be heading up the cast.



Right: Even in death you can be of use – Support mode enables you to spot enemy movement from cameras.

Below: The drones are used by the Attack team to locate enemies/objectives – enemy place markers are temporary, though.







Soon you're rappelling down a building upside down, sniping barricaded enemies or setting laser nets and baiting your own traps. When it all comes together, *Siege*'s unique brand of gameplay finds a natural rhythm like no other.

Unlike the rest of the game, the Horde-style TerroHunt runs at a disappointing 30fps – that's not to say it's unplayable, but it's a technical concession that actively slows the natural flow of the game. There's also a serious discrepancy between the behaviour of the AI between Casual and Hard, with enemies barely showing any aggression until you whack up the challenge. It's still as enthralling as ever and a great way to cut your teeth in *Siege*'s world.

The grand single-player missions of the Vegas games have been dropped almost entirely – you now get a series of ten Situations. However, Ubi wants to dress these up, they're nothing more than tutorials designed to show off the various mechanics of conducting and defending against a siege. Thing is, each one lasts five minutes at best, so when you wrap up the whole lot in less than an hour you can't help feeling a little short-changed. An issue made all the worse by the fact you don't even get an any AI partners!

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

STAY SHARP: Dropping the blueprint-centric planning session of old may sound like heresy, but it fits the new speed of *Siege* perfectly. It's all about recon that's as frantic as the siege itself.

Ubisoft Montreal's decision to drop the more ubiquitous aspects of modern shooters – including regenerative health and respawning – is a positive, and it forces you to wisely measure the economy of your actions. Of the three modes *Siege* has to offer, it's in the PvP Multiplayer mode you'll find that edict of self-preservation most prevalent.

Rather than giving you a *Matrix*-style armoury of guns to build your loadout, *Siege* wisely shifts attention away from the peashooters and places it firmly on the members of your team. Operators are the name of the game, with each avatar offering a unique set of skills, gadgets and weapons suited to a particular playstyle. They're all locked from the start, so earning Renown (*Siege*'s in-game generated currency) and unlocking them feels like an achievement in itself.

Siege certainly offers a depth to its gameplay – switching between Operators to counter the tactics of the opposing team at the start of each new round and seeing your foes topple in the face of your new gadgetry is an acute joy few other shooters can match – but that depth is bookended by the limitations and inherent simplicity of its concept.

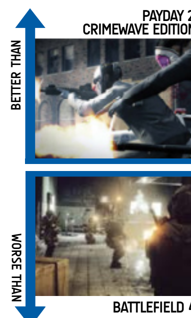
Emergent the gameplay may be at times, but each of the game types that cycle through the PvP multiplayer mode (including Hostage Extract, Bomb Disposal and more) essentially boil down to the same objective. One team fortifies and defends a room or two – the other team attempts to break in and kill everyone/liberate what's being defended. It's part of the game's charm – rounds last five minutes at most and you're rarely bored or wanting for something to do – but it does start to grate as you desperately hope for a more contrasting set of objectives.

Siege, for all its strengths and weaknesses, is a quintessential 2015 shooter. Each round is short and to-the-point to avoid any trace of boredom; the whole thing is geared towards online play. Hey, there's even a bunch of microtransactions. It's a solid FPS, but, much like *Evolve* and *Payday 2: Crimewave Edition*, it's so specific it's in danger of disappearing into its own niche.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, MICROTRANS-ACTION!

Yes, microtransactions are in the game, giving players the chance to boost their XP rate and acquire the skins and weapons they'd normally unlock at a slower pace. Truth be told, the paid-for content barely made an impact on our playthrough and we gained all our Operators and additions to our arsenal at a brisk pace without ever having to pay. And considering Ubi is supporting the game with free maps for the foreseeable future, it's hard to get that frustrated about an optional feature.

BETTER THAN: PAYDAY 2: CRIMEWAVE EDITION



WORSE THAN: BATTLEFIELD 4

VERDICT

REDEFINED FOR A NEW GEN, BUT STILL RAINBOW SIX

gamesTMmag scored **7** for
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

RAIDING IS A LOST ART

Rise Of The Tomb Raider

Right: Exploring *Tomb Raider*'s world rewards you with some spectacular sights.

Below: Using stealth to sneak up on enemies is still a large part of the game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC (Q1 2016), PS4 (Q4 2016)
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Crystal Dynamics
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

If 2012's *Tomb Raider* reboot represented something of an identity crisis for a Lara who professed psychological trauma at being forced to kill while demonstrating a penchant for the endless repetition of that very act, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* represents the transference of that identity crisis to the game itself. This is a game that feels like it is struggling with its desire to remain faithful to *Tomb Raider*'s legacy, ape the work of Naughty Dog, and offer its own vision of what *Tomb Raider* can be all at the same time. That lack of clarity in its vision means that while there are many things that this game does well, it doesn't quite seem to know what those things are, to the effect that it too frequently steps on its own toes.

The strongest string in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*'s bow lies in the sense of adventure it can create through exploration and discovery. At its best moments, slipping through a crack in a wall before delving deep into a subterranean cave structure, falling through a collapsing floor into a watery cavern, or pulling yourself up over the lip of a cliff edge to be confronted by a long lost temple bathed in beautiful sunlight reminds us of the wonder that our young minds found in the likes of *Indiana Jones* and *Treasure Island*, where history, myth and imagination coalesce around secret places lost in time. The game's open structure encourages you to stray off the beaten path, searching for hidden treasures, optional tombs, and resources, so as to create those moments of discovery, but even when following the campaign, the game can make you *feel* like you are happening across some wondrous place, though you know in practice you're following a tightly defined path.

Acknowledging that exploration and discovery are the best parts of the game brings you into confrontation with the first symptom of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*'s identity crisis. It has a far stronger focus on resource collection and crafting than its predecessor – you can make a variety of different arrows for your bow, craft improvised explosives on the fly during combat, and choose from raft of different upgrades for your weapons.



Below: Lara is a fast learner – coming across murals, documents and monoliths in the game's world will see her gradually improve her comprehension of Greek, Russian, and so on, allowing her to discover new secrets.

Below: This entry feels less setpiece heavy, but there are still a few daring escapes to be pulled off under the hail of gunfire and against a backdrop of explosions.



HISTORY, MYTH AND IMAGINATION COALESCE AROUND SECRET PLACES LOST IN TIME



Above: Lara (or 'Laura', as American-accented companions and foes insist on calling her) has some issues relating to the death of her father, but nothing intellectually engaging emerges here as a result.



WHAT MAKES A RAIDER?

While this game moves further away from the *Uncharted* formula than its predecessor, the cues it takes from one of gaming's most well-regarded adventure series are still plain to see. Not content with borrowing a little from *Uncharted*, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* also draws from Naughty Dog's *The Last Of Us*, allowing you to heal your wounds and craft explosives in realtime, rather than in a menu. It might sound obvious to say that *Tomb Raider* is influenced by the original series, but with more tombs to raid and a greater focus on exploration, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* feels closer to the originals than its predecessor.



This places an importance on resources that pushes you to frequently use Lara's 'Survival Instinct' in order to highlight them, along with objectives and collectibles. This takes away from the sense that you are exploring the world and discovering things for yourself, stripping mystery away from its bleak and beautiful landscapes with the press of a button. You could argue that you should discipline yourself not to use Survival Instinct, but the fact that there are two impulses working at counter purposes – the joy of discovery and the desire not to miss important resources and collectibles – is indicative of the problems *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* has.

To return to exploring the world for a moment: part of the reason that process is so enjoyable is down to *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*'s climbing. Starting off with a leap and a pick axe, Lara gradually gains the ability to shoot rope arrows onto distant targets for her to climb, swing from anchor points, hook onto distant ledges mid-jump, and so on. Using all those mechanics together make climbing a crumbling temple or traversing an abandoned Soviet base a lot of fun. It's not exactly complex, but it is more thoughtful than in *Uncharted*, where the best platforming moments tend to be based on ostentatious setpieces. Here, there are smaller slips and hiccups that add a little excitement to picking your way along precarious ledges. Still, momentum is important, so it's a shame that a momentum-breaking mechanic that requires you to shoot arrows into soft wood to create footholds is introduced towards the end of the game. It would be inconsequential were its use not so frequently required towards the end of the game. It reminds you yet again that this title frequently finds ways of messing up the things it does well.

The best example of *ROTTR*'s tendency to trip over its own feet, however, surely lies in its combat. While we wouldn't claim that the combat in the last game was best in class, there was something appealing about its kineticism – the game encouraged you to fight on the move, using Lara's athleticism to gain an advantage over enemies. At times, it was thrilling, especially in some of the larger combat arenas. *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* half remembers that. The game still encourages you to remain on the move in firefights, but, bizarrely, makes it more difficult to do so effectively. There's a sense of claustrophobia to many of its combat areas, exacerbated by the fact that enemies will quickly and relentlessly close you down. Almost immediately after you get in cover, you'll have a grenade lobbed your way, forcing you out, but you'll be peppered with gunfire as soon as you do so by virtue of the fact that enemies are already on top of you. The famous line "Should I stay or should I go?" comes to mind; The Clash didn't know and *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* doesn't either.

Rise Of The Tomb Raider is frustrating, then. It feels like there's an exceptional game in there somewhere, but mechanics and design decisions butt heads so frequently that it struggles for a chance to emerge. It is an enjoyable game, but if only Crystal Dynamics could have resolved its conflicts by focusing its attention on what *Tomb Raider* does best and cutting out anything that got in the way of that, it could have been something far more special.

FAQs

Q. IS THE STORY GOOD?
Lara is a very likable character, but the tale she is involved in is uninteresting, with some obvious 'twists' you can see coming a mile away.

Q. DOES IT RUN WELL ON XBOX ONE?
The frame-rate is prone to take a dip during cutscenes, but the game looks fantastic.

Q. IS IT COMING TO PS4?
Yes, but you'll have to wait around a year before you can play it.

BETTER THAN — REMEMBER ME



WORSE THAN — TOMB RAIDER

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

CHASING LEADERBOARDS: Competitive multiplayer is gone in *Rise*, but it does have score attack style game modes that encourage you to compete to best your friends on the leaderboards.

VERDICT
A FUN ADVENTURE HAMPERED BY A LACK OF VISION

7 — gamesTMmag scored **7** for Rise Of The Tomb Raider
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

BIGGER AND BETTER. WELL, MOSTLY

Xenoblade Chronicles X

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Monolith Soft
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

For every massive way in which this sequel to the Wii title *Xenoblade Chronicles* builds on its predecessor's accomplishments, it throws in a tiny disappointment too. Although the prevailing feeling while playing is unmistakably one of excitement, it's difficult to ignore the occasional drawbacks that prevent it from becoming an instant classic.

The game takes place on Mira, a planet newly inhabited by crash-landed humans escaping an Earth destroyed by war. Building a new world for themselves on Mira, the humans aren't out of danger yet, because one of the alien races that destroyed Earth is now setting its sights on them. It's up to you to help prepare for the inevitable war that's coming, while also exploring the planet to find the escape pods that have yet to be recovered.

Where the previous *Xenoblade Chronicles* put players in control of the likeable Shulk, this time you're in charge of creating your own custom character, setting their gender, appearance and in-battle voice. While this may seem like an improvement over its predecessor, the payoff for having numerous voiceovers to choose from is a 'silent' protagonist who doesn't talk during cutscenes and only shouts generic words of encouragement during battles. Worse, their backstory initially consists of little more than the tired 'amnesia' trope. Thankfully the story does eventually pick up the pace and get genuinely compelling, but your mute hero often feels like a bystander who just stands there while everyone else forms a plan.

The plot isn't the only area in which *Xenoblade Chronicles X* both enhances and detracts from the last game, with the much-loved battle system being another key example. At its core, its principle remains the same: potential enemies are freely roaming the land and you can choose to trigger or avoid most battles at will. At face value, it's been improved with a number of new features, which make fights more varied.

You can now switch between melee and ranged weapons at the press of a button, and doing so frequently makes for a successful combat strategy. You can also target specific body parts of enemies, letting you focus on

Right: Some missions end with large monsters to kill. They're often difficult and if you die you're sent back to an earlier checkpoint, but not before an optional 30-second period where you can wait to see if your allies kill it first.

Below: Some of the creatures you encounter are jaw-dropping. Thankfully, some (like this one) are docile, letting you run past without incident.



Above: Columns of light around the planet indicate locations where you can plant probes that reveal more data on the map.

Below: There's little more satisfying in any RPG than seeing the damage points cascade off your enemies in a game.



"THE WORLD OF MIRA IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE MOST IMPRESSIVE THING ABOUT THE GAME, WITH FIVE HUGE AREAS SPANNING TWO CONTINENTS"



Above: As in its predecessor, *Xenoblade Chronicles X* has a day and night cycle that affects a number of elements, such as the type of enemies you encounter and NPC presence.



DIVISIONAL BRIEFINGS

Once you become a BLADE – part of the colony's military system – you get to sign up to one of eight different divisions. These affect the details of some missions and support effects during battle. For example, Curators are focused on exploration and collecting different materials, while Mediators are more interested in solving NPC problems and completing the game's enormous relationship chart. Each division is set up to complement a particular playing style: Pathfinders are for those who want to focus on revealing the entire map, while Harriers are the division most suited to *Monster Hunter* players, since their goal is to defeat monsters and their melee strength is boosted to enable this. You can change divisions if your priorities change while playing.



the parts that deal the most damage and take them out, weakening them. Combine this with an enhanced squad system that lets you choose from a sizeable list of commands to dish out to your teammates and there's a decent level of tactical variety on offer.

Other tweaks are less welcome. Battles now last significantly longer than they did before, with the weakest of enemies taking up to a couple of minutes to defeat and larger foes taking far longer. While the aim of this was undoubtedly to give battles a more 'epic' feel, the result is that grinding – which was a joy to do in the previous game given its seamless nature – is now something you'll avoid because it takes too long.

The introduction of giant mechs, known as Skells, results in a similar inner turmoil. If you're the sort who takes on side quests as you play through the main adventure, it can take you well over 40 hours to reach the point where you're finally given control of a Skell. When you finally step inside, the feeling is one of immense excitement and though it doesn't initially provide the massive leap in power you were expecting, you'll greatly appreciate the way it makes traversing the game's enormous landscape much easier.

And what a landscape it is. The world of Mira is undoubtedly the most impressive thing about *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, consisting of five huge areas spanning two continents. Players are actively encouraged to explore as much of the world as possible, and while fast travel is possible it's unlikely you'll want to use it much except when you're polishing off certain missions. That the whole world is available as one enormous landscape with no load times is a technical masterstroke, and while enormous beasts many levels higher than you are dotted around to try to prevent you from exploring areas you aren't yet ready to reach, there are always ways around such prohibitions.

FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE VOICE ACTING?
Mostly American, though you can choose Shulk's voice actor for your battle cries, including the classic "I'm really feeling it".

Q. AND THE MUSIC?
An eclectic mix of orchestral goodness and electronica, some of which approaches impressive levels of cheese.

Q. ARE THE MECHS FUN?
Yes, but don't get too used to them: they need repairing so often that using them can sometimes feel like a chore.

BETTER THAN
HYRULE WARRIORS



WORSE THAN
MONSTER HUNTER 3 ULTIMATE

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

PSEUDO-MMO: Although the game supports online co-op for up to four players you can have up to 32 inhabiting the same map, able to trade items and information with you.

There are times when it can feel a little too vast, especially when taking on difficult and lengthy missions. If you die you respawn back at the last notable landmark you visited, but since the battles take so long, you can find yourself being sent as far as half an hour back in time, with any XP you gained still intact but all the enemies you defeated back in their original spot, looking noticeably non-dead.

Though none of these issues are minor, they still aren't enough to completely ruin the overall experience. Monolith Soft may have made a few missteps with this ambitious project but the overriding feeling is that this is a game you'll happily plough well over 100 hours into exploring its world, taking on its side-quests and finishing its main story. And that's before you even start considering the online multiplayer, which starts you off on solo quests and soon has you teaming up with others in *Monster Hunter* style four-person co-op scraps.

For the most part, *Xenoblade Chronicles X* is astounding. For all its faults it's still an enormous RPG with one of the best worlds you'll ever explore and an expanded version of its battle system with fights that, while longer, are still a joy to seamlessly hop in and out of. For every massive feature it introduces, though, there's another small niggle that keeps you from falling completely in love. The result is a game that feels like it's continually taking five steps forward, but one step back.

VERDICT
AN OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT BUT NOT WITHOUT FLAWS

8

gamesTMmag scored **8** for
Xenoblade Chronicles X



Left: The game is at its most interesting when you are pitted against a humanoid adversary, be it in a scripted event or in online PVP. These fights demand, would you believe it, some strategy.



Right: Airborne boss fights, while visually epic, feel lacklustre. A lot of the time you'll find yourself skirting around the creature, taking potshots with spells. Close quarters combat will only earn you a one-way ticket to the ground.

WANT TO PLAY A GAME…ABOUT A GAME?

Sword Art Online: Lost Song

To label *Sword Art Online: Lost Song* as one of the most generic JRPGs out there would be to do the term 'generic JRPG' an injustice. That would make *SOA:LS* peers with, say, *Tales Of Zestiria*, and at least there's *some* fun to be had from that game. No, there's a hell of a lot more wrong with *SAO:LS*.

Perhaps the root of this problem is the game's source material, the *Sword Art Online* anime series. While *SAO:LS* is a faithful adaptation of the popular anime – albeit set in a different continuity – that's not necessarily a good thing. It brings across the 'questionable' storylines that the series is infamous for. The game's cringe-inducing romance plotlines are a particular low point. Not only are they an onslaught of shameless perversion – one 'quest' involved a group groping session – the game manages to sink even lower by casually glossing over a case of implied incest like it's completely fine. Perverted travesties aside, we don't particularly mind the game's *.hack*-esque fake MMORPG setting, – *.hack* proved you can construct an interesting story based on this – but the main storyline in *SAO:LS* is to clear the fictional game's DLC. That's it. From the player's point of view, there's no interest.

Artdink does deserve praise in the fact that it has managed to emulate the general 'feel' of a thriving MMORPG, though. The game's field areas are *massive* and they are rammed full of frequently respawning enemies, and the game's main town/hub area feels suitably populated with NPCs and roaming 'player' characters. But while the world feels authentic enough, the actual gameplay feels archaic. In combat you'll find yourself mashing the two attack buttons more so than you would be when playing a *Dynasty Warriors* game. But where in *Dynasty Warriors* it works thanks to enemies falling to virtually one hit, in *SAO:LS* it feels like you're bashing your head against a wall courtesy of stunted attack animations and frustrating cases where your character falls over for virtually every hit taken.

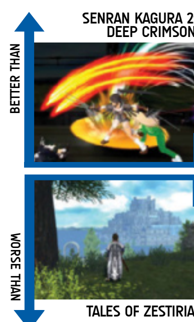
Then there's the control scheme: readying/sheathing weapons, sprinting and the skill menu are all mapped to the R1 button, for example, making for frequent cases where you perform the *exact opposite* action than you intended.

Consistently, *SAO:LS* made us feel frustrated and a little ashamed with ourselves for actually sitting through it. Die-hard fans of the franchise may find something to enjoy thanks to the relentless fan-service but others would do better to go and actually play an MMORPG.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Vita, PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: Artdink
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: SENRAN KAGURA 2: DEEP CRIMSON



WORSE THAN: TALES OF ZESTIRIA

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

'SOCIETAL NORMS': It goes without saying but it is probably best to cut the incestuous and more 'risque' moments from the game, especially seeing as this is rated 12+ by PEGI…

VERDICT

EMBARRASSING, QUITE FRANKLY

4

gamesTMmag scored 4 for Sword Art Online: Lost Song

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

MORE OF A PARTY AND LESS OF A CROWD FOR THIS MULTI-MARIO MASHUP

Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam Bros.

Right: Paper Mario isn't just there for fun - he's a vital member of your party. One of his special abilities enables him to make copies of himself. These act as extra lives in battle and can also be used to multiply damage when attacking enemies.

When a certain moustached plumber waltzed his way out of the platforming genre and into the turn-based battles of the RPG back in 1996 we all laughed. Mario in a legitimate 15+ hour adventure? Bah! And then we all realised it was absolutely brilliant, wiped the crumbs of humble pie from our embarrassed faces and played *Super Mario RPG: Legend Of The Seven Stars* until the SNES cart turned to dust.

Almost two decades later and Mario and co are still going strong in the land of levelling up, and their latest adventure, *Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam Bros.* aims to live up to the storied legacy with fresh mini-games, brand new attacks and a certain fellow by the name of Paper Mario. Yes, *the* paper-based plumber! And he's brought a bunch of other friends and foes from his papercraft world with him.

Coming a mere two years after the excellent *Mario & Luigi: Dream Team Bros.*, there was a worry Nintendo was just going to farm out another predictable entry in the much-loved series. But the infusion with the *Paper Mario* series gives *Paper Jam Bros.* a unique fusion flavour we've never tasted before - and one that adds a freshness and longevity to combat and exploration where *Dream Team Bros.* often grew stale.

That's not to say this isn't a game without repetition - it *is* an RPG after all, and an ultra-simplified one at that but this is still a *Mario* game and that simplification works as it gels impressively with the platforming exploration that takes you across the Mushroom Kingdom. You see, Luigi accidently opens a magic book and unleashes the folks from the *Paper Mario* universe - unfortunately that includes their version of Bowser, who's soon teaming up with his 3D incarnation to wreak multidimensional havoc.

Combining the two franchises is a dream come true in theory, but it's a little one-sided in execution. Being an AlphaDream game, the same developer that gave us *DTB* in 2013, this is very much another entry in its familiar mould with Paper Mario simply tagging along for the ride. That's not to say it's a bad game - far from it - but those expecting nuanced additional characters and numerous side-missions will be disappointed.

The lack of proper collaboration between AlphaDream and Intelligent Systems is something to be lamented for sure, but the inclusion of PM and co take what could have been another plodding remix of past *Mario & Luigi* games and added a welcome splash of colour to proceedings. Just like *DTB*, you explore the overworld as one unit, only this time the duo are joined by PM. Having Mario mapped to A, Luigi to B and PM to Y does make controlling them a little tricky (thankfully you can press X to make them jump in unison but it does make platforming cumbersome at times), and having to perform simultaneous dodges in battle never feels intuitive.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: AlphaDream
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: Fancy a game of squash? Keep the combo going between Mario, Luigi and Paper Mario to maximise damage against foes.





Right: Alongside the brilliant Trio Attacks brought to the table by Paper Mario, there are also plenty of new Mario and Luigi based duo attacks added to the mix.

COMBINING THE TWO FRANCHISES IS A DREAM COME TRUE IN THEORY, BUT IS A LITTLE ONE-SIDED IN EXECUTION





FAQs

Q. IS IT A LONG RPG?
By RPG standards it's pretty light at around 20-25 hours. You're unlikely to get bored.

Q. HOW DOES IT USE THE DUAL SCREENS?
Not well – the bottom screen is mostly there for saving and switching between jumping/using the hammer.

Q. ALL THE USUAL FACES PRESENT?
Paper Jam Bros. has a cast bursting with regulars (and a few surprises).



AMIIBO SELECTA

As expected, *Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam Bros.* does come with support for Amiibo, but not in the way you're probably expecting. Completing certain tasks unlocks special cards – if you have a *Mario*-related figure to hand, simply touch it down on your handheld and said card will be imbued with a special ability (such as stat boosts or unique attacks). Then it can only be used once per battle, and while they're not essential (non-Amiibo owners can trade blank cards for coin) they certainly make tougher battles later on a little easier. It's great that Nintendo included support for *Paper Jam Bros.*, but the functionality never feels any more than a cheap novelty at best.



Those button/enemy-bashing hammers return, only this time you can perform a triple hit that destroys giant obstacles while offering a powerful way to bring down enemy health before another turn-based battle. Which brings us rather neatly to combat. As with both *PM* and the *Mario & Luigi* franchise, proceedings are turn-based and anyone familiar with *DTB*'s mixture of jump-on-your-foes-like-it's-a-platformer, hammer strikes and Bros Attacks will feel right at home.

The 2D slant makes the difference here - enemy parties are often full of both 3D and paper based foes, requiring a pleasing extra layer of tactics to an otherwise simple system. The addition of special Trio Attacks descends into crazy mini-game madness, such as a game of squash that does more damage the longer you keep the game going. These keep battles interesting.

Sadly, the brilliant and memorable dream sequences that divided *Dream Team Bros.* so well are gone, but *PJB* comes with its own side goodies. The big meta quest of *PJB* is to collect various Paper Toads spread across the land. These appear seemingly at random in the overworld but can mostly be found in special challenges dotted across the game. These range from playing find the paper-thin Toad in a closed off area or chases that show off your new diving tackle move. Still pining for *Mario Rugby*? This'll sate you for a bit.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

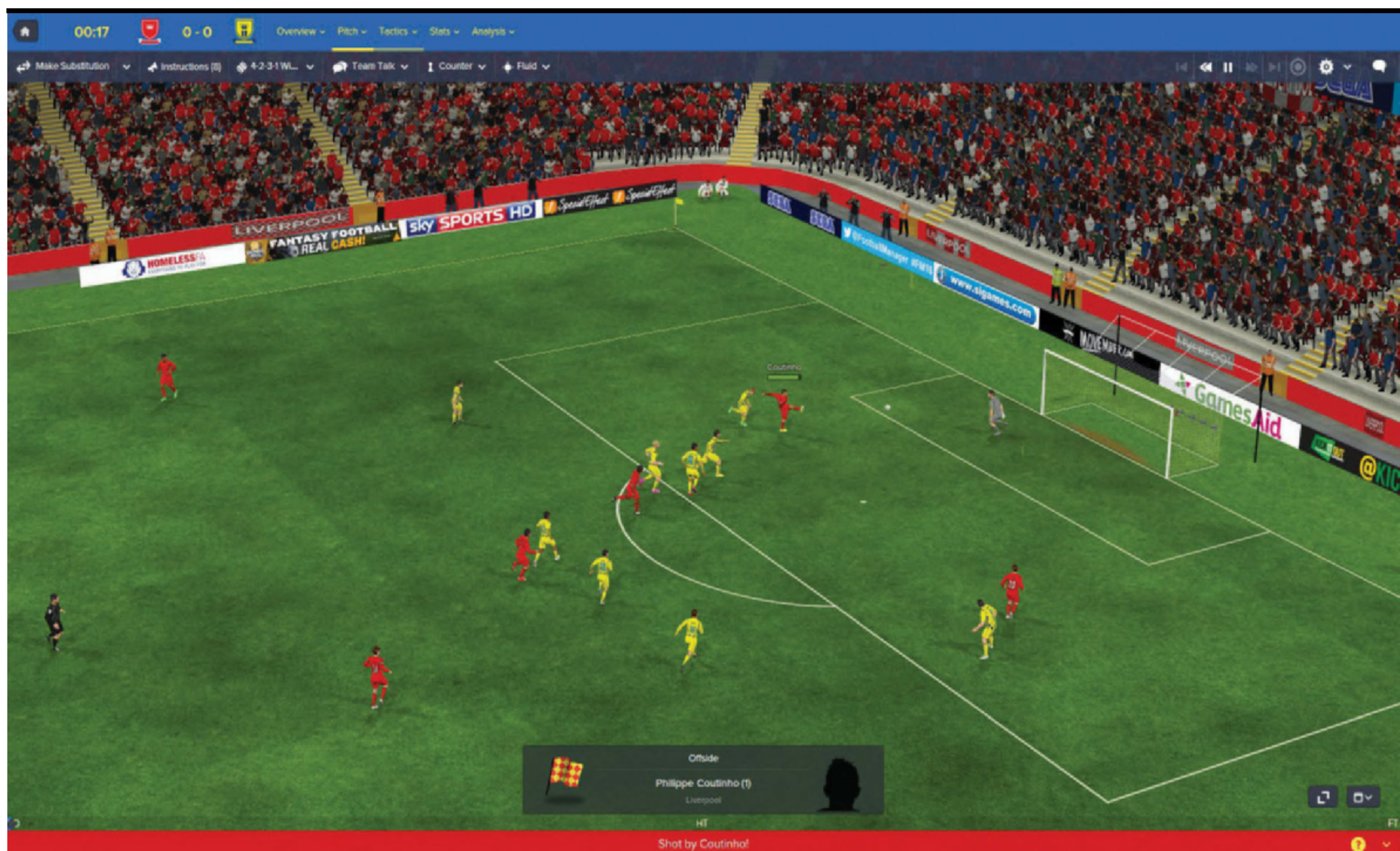
OFF THE BEATEN PATH: Additional missions are found by multiple Lakitu scattered across the land, but there's a lack of side-missions elsewhere. A few more quests, spread more evenly, would work far better.

Boss battles have also been given a papercraft makeover. You can now control a giant origami-esque Mario and battle giant goombas and the like - the combat is basic and coming out on top isn't much of a challenge, but the inclusion of a rhythm-action mini-game that enables you to recharge mid-round adds a fun twist. There's a charming *Tearaway* feel to these sections, as with the rest of *Paper Jam Bros.*, but they're just not as engaging as the dream sequences of its predecessor. Thankfully, there are plenty of bosses to face in the classic turn-based style the series does so well.

While the addition of Paper Mario and chums isn't quite the dream-realising revolution we were hoping for, the papercraft factor does give exploration and battles a much needed kick up the keester. The new take on boss battles won't linger in the memory, but the writing and humour that made *Dream Team Bros.* such a pleasure to play returns wittier than ever. Its platforming sections won't be troubling *Super Mario 3D Land*, but if you're looking for RPG Mario at his modern best, you won't go far wrong with this.

VERDICT
PAPERCRAFT SHENANIGANS ARE A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

8
gamesTMmag scored 8 for
Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam Bros.
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: The 3D match engine serves up a pleasantly diverse set of scenarios, but it remains visually underwhelming. *Football Manager* has never rested on the quality of its graphics, though, and what's here does a fine job.

PREPARE TO LOSE YOUR LIFE… AGAIN

Football Manager 2016

In the best way possible, *Football Manager 2016* is an exhausting pastime. A decade ago, and more, all this series really asked you to do was define a formation, sign players and balance the books. Nowadays, if that's all you're doing then you're dooming yourself to failure.

Delving into individual and team-wide training regimes, pouring over thousands of numbers and statistics, scouting opponents weeks, sometimes months, in advance and holding regular meetings to discern the mindset and aspirations of your squad are all elements that can never be overlooked. Leave out just one of these, amongst countless others, and your chances of victory against even the most modest opposition drop to something approaching zero.

Realistically, then, to get the most out of this you need to abandon any and all ambitions across all other games and dedicate yourself to pulling Portsmouth back up through the English leagues and into Europe… or whatever your personal football fantasy might be.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Sports Interactive
PRICE: £34.99 (via Steam)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-32
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.2 GHz Processor, 2GB RAM, NVidia GeForce FX 5900, 3GB Hard Drive Space, DirectX 9.0c
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Achieving such goals is more pleasing than it has ever been. This is a series that has forever featured ideas that have outpaced the interface design team's ability to skilfully portray them, resulting in presentation that is - to put it lightly - barely fit for purpose. Such a disconnect is not an issue this season. The visual slate does a quite brilliant job of representing the underlying functions and reasoning of the game, as well as its constantly evolving personal narrative.

PROVIDES THE MOST TANGIBLE LINK TO THE WORLD OF FOOTBALL THAT ANY GAME HAS EVER ACHIEVED

Best of all are the new Prozone-branded options for displaying and understanding complex in-game events and tendencies. Prozone is, as ardent football fans will already know, the premier name in real-life football analytics and the company that provide many professional clubs with post-match data on their own players and upcoming opponents. Having everything from heat maps to crossing positions, and from where the ball is most frequently intercepted to how many passes your keeper makes to your left back, is akin to opening the most informative treasure trove of football secrets that the most numerically-minded fan could ever dream of.

The sheer diversity of means available for analysing a game helps not only your understanding of this digital world, but also facilitates an education of the intricacies of the

FAQs

Q. DOES CHALLENGE MODE RETURN?

Yes, it does. Disappointingly, though, the available challenges are the same as previous years.

Q. IS WAYNE ROONEY DECENT?

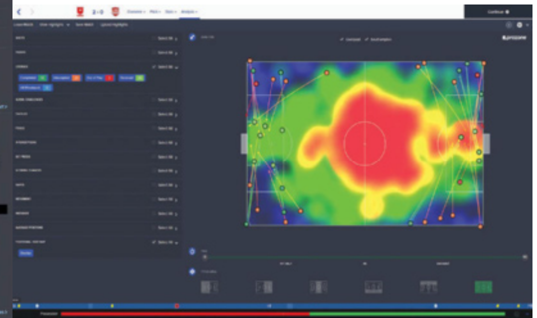
He's a better option here than he is in reality, but he's far from the game's best attacking threat.

Q. OFFICIAL PREMIER LEAGUE LICENCE?

No. Player and club names are correct, but logos and kits are generic.

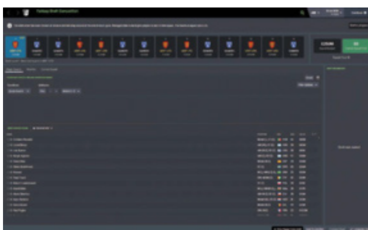


Below: Prozone visual data, such as this heat map, provides an invaluable set of tools with which to garner better insight into the workings of each and every player on the field.

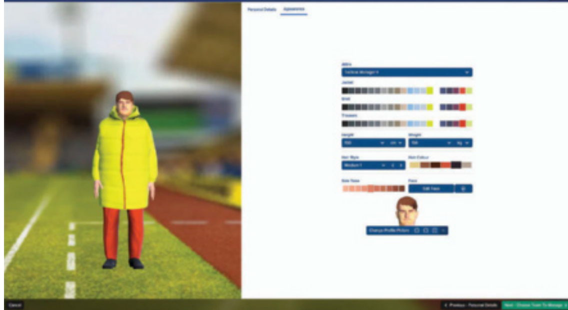


Right: Fantasy Draft allows you and your friends to face-off against one another using a team of your own selection.

Below: If you're new to the series then the full game can be a difficult beast to understand at first.







MAKE-A-MANAGER

In previous releases you've been able to define your manager's birthplace, age, football experience and individual stats relating to tactical knowledge and ability to motivate players. Now, however, that customisation takes on a visual dimension in that you can design your own appearance.

Frankly, it's impossible to make anyone that looks as though they even vaguely resemble a professional manager. The graphical quality just isn't there. Further, you'll only be treated to glimpses of your avatar if you opt to view games using the 3D match engine. It's a cute novelty to see your creation perched on the touchline, but that's all it is.



real thing. Thanks to this deceptively simple portrayal of complex data Sports Interactive has, then, provided the most tangible link to the world of football that any videogame has ever achieved. *FIFA* and *PES* might let you catch a (very) fleeting glimpse of what it's like to be Messi or Ronaldo, but *Football Manager* allows you to understand concisely what exactly makes these players the world-beating entities that they are.

Statistical wealth of this variety only achieves its full potential when you're engaged in the 'full' Football Manager option. If you're less inclined towards fiddling over training rotas and worrying about whether Nathaniel Clyne is tackling hard enough then the Football Manager Touch variation provides a more accessible, quicker alternative.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PROZONE: The visual data tools from sports performance analysts Prozone help enormously when it comes to identifying the strengths and weaknesses of your own team, as well as the opposition.

Touch is what was previously known as 'Classic', a game mode that harks back to those pre-*Football Manager* days in which *Championship Manager* was King of the Kop. Simply: everything is easier. The game won't punish you for not properly implementing the advice of your scouting department and clubs take a softer line when it comes to selling their star players to you, for example.

It's true that Touch offers something that lacks comparative depth, but it's also the best way to enjoy certain aspects. Playing games online with/against friends, for instance, is much better done under the Touch banner. By ridding yourselves of the need to trawl through every screen in minute detail you open the door to being able to realistically complete a season in a week or less. This becomes particularly pertinent if playing with series newcomers, not least as it prevents you having to navigate the time sink required to explain the multitude of quirks that must be understood and engaged with.

Multiplayer sees the addition of a completely new mode designed to take advantage of the explosion in popularity of fantasy football. The Football Manager Fantasy Draft mode allows up to 32 players to simultaneously take part in a process of selecting players from the game's database, creating themselves a dream team with the view to winning a fictional league or cup.

Prior to the draft starting you can select how much money each player is allowed to spend, up to a maximum of £250 million. However, with Messi and Ronaldo both valued in excess of £60 million, and even players at the level of Falcao and Van Persie coming in at roughly £30 million, it's impossible to simply wade in and select what would constitute a modern World XI. As with everything in *Football Manager*, a degree of thought is required.

Football Manager has always excelled in providing a rich simulation, but it hasn't been so impressive when it comes to offering multiple ways in which to penetrate its world. The addition of the draft system shines a new light on the core elements, allowing for a new tone and form of play.

It's that, along with the improvements in how data is presented, that makes this the finest game Sports Interactive has released. Games released annually tend to feel incredibly similar year on year, but a lack of progress isn't something that can be claimed here. Yes, at its core it's the *Football Manager* we know and love, only this time it's a treat for the eyes as well as the head.

VERDICT
THE MOST EDUCATIONAL AND EXHAUSTIVE EDITION YET.

9
gamesTMmag scored **9** for
Football Manager 2016
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

YOU CAN SING AND MAKE A SILLY VIDEO, TOO

Just Dance 2016

Once a year around Christmas time since 2009, the latest instalment of one of our guiltiest pleasures lands in our laps. Close the curtains, lock your doors and tell the neighbours you're hosting a swingers' party, dealing drugs or building up your collection of cats – anything to dissuade them from peeping through your blinds and discovering the truth: you're playing *Just Dance 2016* and really enjoying it.

As seasoned veterans, we're ticking off a roster of standard features to the series before we've even popped the disc in. It's got solo, rival and co-operative play modes, an online video upload and rating system, a 'quest' mode and the bolt-on fitness schtick, which we think should show how much you've burned off in mince pies, rather than calories.

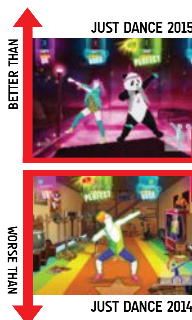
Showtime's a new mode where you perform (and sing, if you dare) over a track while the game superimposes a naff photoshop-style texture effect over your image. Plus, there's a streaming service called *Just Dance Unlimited*, a kind of season pass that allows subscribers to download new songs and content beyond what's available on-disc at launch. That'll set you back £5.59 ($6.99) a month.

Given the predilection of Wii Remotes to suck the life out of AA batteries in a heartbeat and drop their connection to the console mid-game, we were looking forward to a very welcome new addition to the series, the *Just Dance Controller* app. Once linked to your Wi-Fi, it allows those with Android 4.1 or an iPhone 5 or better, to use their smartphone as a controller. Of course, how accurately the game reads your movements still isn't clear. During a vigorous stomp the sensor bar dropped off the TV, yet we were still scoring the odd 'perfect' while we scrambled to fix it.

Ultimately, with the antics of the on-screen characters, zany actions, video playback and favourite tracks, it doesn't really matter even if *Just Dance 2016* is making a very generous interpretation of your moves because there are enough layers of distraction in place to keep you happy. We skipped past the modern hits to head straight for the silly stuff. Like the *William Tell Overture*. If Rossini was still alive today, we think he would have been happy to see two animated jockeys stamp around on pretend horses to his 1828 classic, while the *Balkan Blast Remix* of *Angry Birds* is a must for kids. Our personal favourite is *Chiwawa* by Wanko Ni Mero Mero, a piece of J-pop genius that, sandwiched between forgettable mainstream hits, came so far from the leftfield that we nearly died laughing. That fairly summarises our whole *Just Dance 2016* experience – as long as Ubisoft continue to include enough wonderfully mental tracks, we'll probably never tire of the series.

DETAILS

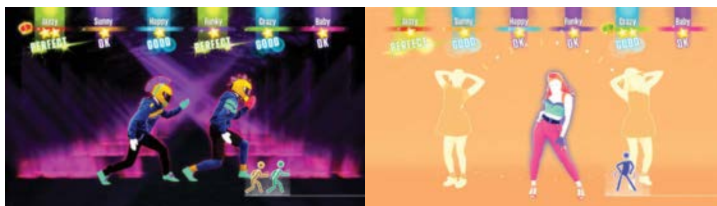
FORMAT: Wii U
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PS4, Wii, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £17.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SMART CONTROL: Download the *Just Dance Controller* app and use your Android or Apple smartphone as a controller. We cannot guarantee its accuracy, however.



Below: As motion controls have fallen out of favour on the major consoles, Ubisoft has turned to mobile apps to make sure players can still enjoy the game on any system.

VERDICT

ONE WORD: CHIWAWA

gamesTMmag scored **7** for Just Dance 2016

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: Discriminate against a green pig using a forceful chest-bump to knock it off screen and collapse the set behind you. You don't actually have to get physical with that player, but it's much more fun if you do.





Left: *Ultra Smash*'s use of amiibo is one of the game's better features and rare, genuine innovations. It's also one of the few titles to write data to the figures, so say goodbye to any *Super Smash Bros* progress

UNFORCED ERRORS EVERYWHERE

Mario Tennis: Ultra Smash

Time again for the Mushroom Kingdom's answer to Wimbledon, but it's not all strawberries and cream. Nintendo's latest entry in the hybrid sports/party game errs closer to the latter, proving fun in a group, but not offering much more than grind when playing alone.

The big addition – literally – are Mega Mushrooms, thrown on to the court during matches. Collect one and they'll super size your character, boosting power and range. The difference feels negligible though, as even at regular size you can still easily bat the ball back. The eponymous ultra-smash moves deliver lightning-fast returns with some visual flair, but again this doesn't change things that much.

There's not a great amount of variety in modes either. The default Mega Battles offer customisable matches, while Classic Tennis is just that – tennis without the fanciful stylings of the Marioverse. Mega Ball Rally, meanwhile, is a skills test, keeping the ball in motion while affording you opportunity to test moves out. Knockout Challenge entertains though, serving up a succession of AI opponents. This is also where *Ultra Smash* brings in its amiibo support where every five matches earns a compatible figure a stat boost. The amiibo can be used as a support player, although rivals' AI are so weak, even on higher difficulties, that you will rarely use them.

Controls are *Ultra Smash*'s biggest problem. The Wii U GamePad is a glorified second screen with four display modes – Recommended, with action on the TV and scores displayed on the controller's petite window; Reverse, with player one watching the GamePad screen and the opponent shown on the TV; Dynamic, where "the match will be displayed from an exciting close-up viewpoint"; and Duplicate, showing the match on both – no touch input and no motion controls.

The absence of the latter is bizarre considering the Wii U supports Wii remotes. Oh, they'll work – but only as horizontally-held joypads. It's even stranger given the original Wii never saw its own Mario Tennis game. Instead, it had a "New Play Control!" version of the GameCube's *Mario Power Tennis*, with Wii remote support. That version remains playable thanks to Wii U backwards compatibility, so the strange reality is that an 11-year old game is still the best tennis game on a Nintendo console since *Wii Sports*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Camelot Software Planning
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

MARIO'S TENNIS (VIRTUAL BOY)

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

MARIO POWER TENNIS

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

REMOTE CHANCE: Seriously, why doesn't this have Wii remote support? The control scheme is so obvious that it's almost palpable by its absence. Nintendo missed a golden opportunity here.

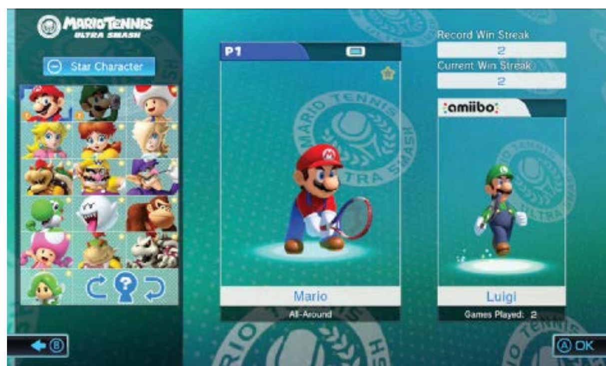
VERDICT

FUN, BUT NOTHING ON ITS 11-YEAR OLD PREDECESSOR

5

gamesTMmag scored **5** for
Mario Tennis: Ultra Smash

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

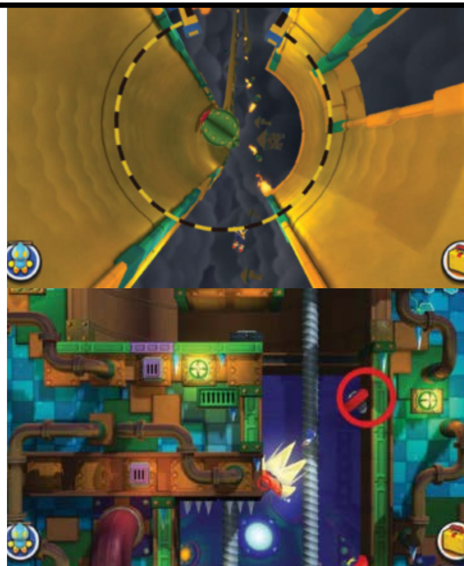


Above: There are plenty of unlockable characters, but little challenge or reward in getting them. Simply grind enough coins from basic matches and you can buy almost everything



Below: *Sonic Lost World*'s Wii U origins mean that it doesn't push hardware too hard, but it looks gorgeous anyway. It's a testament to the power of art direction over raw processing grunt in creating a compelling visual experience.





DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Sonic Team
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Pentium Dual-Core T4200 (2x2.0GHz) or AMD equivalent, 2 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce 8800 (512MB) / ATI Radeon HD 2900 (512MB), 8GB free disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

SONIC BOOM: RISE OF LYRIC

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

SONIC GENERATIONS

MISSING THAT HEX FACTOR

Sonic Lost World

If you missed *Sonic Lost World* the first time around, you can easily be forgiven – as a Wii U exclusive, it struggled to catch the public's attention. But while we're pleased to see Sega continuing to bring its back catalogue to PC, *Sonic Lost World* isn't exactly a lost classic. As the first attempt at a new formula after *Sonic Generations*, it was an experiment that didn't quite work out.

Sonic Lost World sees Sonic and Tails venturing to the Lost Hex to battle the Zeti, a race of creatures doing Eggman's bidding in his latest world-conquering scheme. It's a beautiful world to race through, as Sonic Team has sensibly brought the classic Mega Drive Sonic aesthetic into the modern era – colourful, abstract landscapes are filled with cute animal-themed robot enemies. The PC port is excellent throughout with a constant 60fps performance. The soundtrack is also of a high standard, with some excellent tunes that will stick in your head for days after playing.

Sonic Lost World's key design conceit is its unusual level architecture – stages take a variety of forms, from classic 2D-style sections to spherical 3D stages reminiscent of *Super Mario Galaxy*, though perhaps it would have been best not to invite that comparison. Most commonly, you'll encounter cylindrical stages which cleverly keep the game 3D while maintaining the somewhat linear level design that Sonic thrives on. To go with the new level layouts, Sonic has a new control system. He's gained some parkour abilities, as he can run up and along walls when necessary, but he's also gained a run button – a heresy to long-term *Sonic* fans.

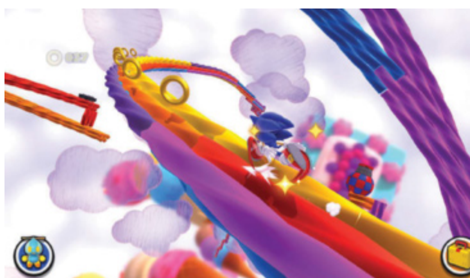
Sonic games have historically alternated between slower precision platforming sections and fast-paced action sequences. *Sonic Unleashed* and *Sonic Generations* favoured the latter to the detriment of the former; in *Sonic Lost World* the pendulum has swung the other way. While you have a high degree of control during the game's slower sections, Sonic feels sluggish when you're trying to move at speed. At their best, *Sonic* games have levels that encourage seamless, uninterrupted movement and a control system that enables that – a feat *Sonic Lost World* sometimes manages. But all too often it just feels awkward and disjointed.

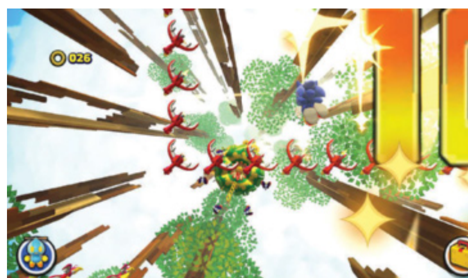
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

RUN BUTTON: Surely this isn't necessary in a *Sonic* game with analogue controls? It's 2015, guys.
ANIMAL ACTION: The requirement to rescue a certain number of animals to unlock stages is silly.

There are good ideas in *Sonic Lost World*, and even fleeting moments of brilliance – the wide-open assault course of Desert Ruins Zone 1 stands out as a particular highlight. But for every bit that works brilliantly and provides the thrilling action we want from *Sonic*, there's a weak boss encounter or an awkward stop-start stage that dents your enthusiasm. In 2013, *Sonic Lost World* was a game with good ideas that simply hadn't been refined far enough. Despite a good PC port and a couple of years to come around to the design, that's still true in 2015.





VERDICT

NOT GREAT, BUT NOT A LOST CAUSE

gamesTMmag scored **6** for
Sonic Lost World
6
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE





"I've put about 70 hours into Splatoon and I have not put one second of that into the single-player experience"
STEVE STOPPS, FOUNDER, TEAM LUMO

WHY I ❤...

SPLATOON

STEVE STOPPS, FOUNDER, TEAM LUMO

I could tell you all sorts of inspirational games, but Splatoon *is the game of the year for me and it's also slightly sad that so many people aren't going to get to experience such an amazing game. I know that there are lots of things that people don't like about the game, like it doesn't have voice chat, but I love the fact that it doesn't have voice chat. I'm a 40-year old guy who doesn't play games that often so I'm not always very good at them. The intimidation factor of going into an online multiplayer game where you're basically berated by 12-year-olds for doing a bad job, I probably wouldn't play most of them. With that game, I just ran straight in. I've put about 70 hours into Splatoon and I have not put one second of that into the single-player experience.*

I love the charm and the personality of the game. I love that it's quirky and left-field where you're swapping between being a kid and squid. The range of weapons is phenomenal. The fact that you can be out battling and involved in the thick of it, but also have just as great a game with just a roller painting areas and not be involved in the combat, I love that. And it's just nice when it's not violent. It's nice to have a game that is an arena battle game where you get all of the thrill and all of the excitement that those games give you, but you're not shooting a hole in someone's head. All you're doing is going around and painting the world and there's no benefit to shooting the other players other than they're out of the game for 15 seconds.

RETRO

NO.169

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

GAME BOY

Nintendo's Game Boy may not have been the first handheld console, but it was the first to dominate the industry. Here we investigate its most essential releases

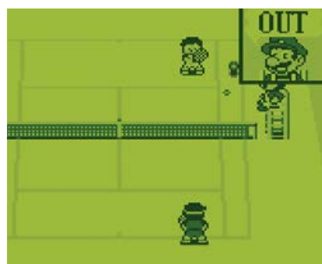
IF NINTENDO'S GAME Boy proved anything, it's that you don't have to be powerful to be the best. Although it launched to an open market in April 1989, it wasn't long before competitors were preparing their own handheld consoles, consoles that would all be far more powerful than Nintendo's 8-bit system. The Lynx arrived later in the year, with the Game Gear and TurboExpress following in 1990. All three systems had better tech, and full colour screens, but none of them could stop Nintendo's miniature marvel.

The Game Boy may have had a monochrome screen, weedy speakers and low tech hardware, but it also had amazing battery life compared to its peers, an insanely good pack-in game in the form of *Tetris* and some of the best platform games around. Sure, it had a large amount of licensed tat, but it also had a surprisingly vast range of different games that covered a large number of different genres, from sports games to RPGs.

Nintendo wasn't completely ignorant of the handheld scene either, thanks to the earlier success of its *Game & Watch* series, and while its own support was rather hit and miss at times, some excellent catches, including the acquisition of Gamefreak's *Pokémon* franchise, breathed fresh new life into the system while it was halfway through its lifespan. Eventually superseded by the Game Boy Color in 1998, Game Boy allowed Nintendo to create and hold a cast iron grip on the handheld industry, a grip that is only now beginning to weaken under the constant assault of various iOS and Android devices.







TENNIS 1989

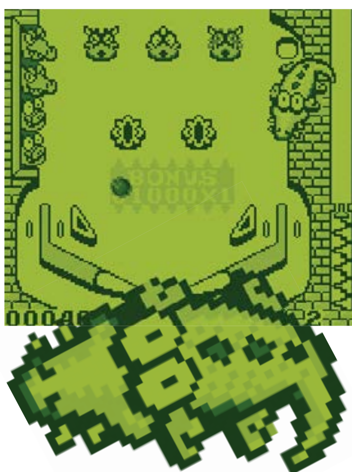
NINTENDO R&D1

Until *Mario Tennis* arrived for the Game Boy Color, this was the best tennis game available on a Nintendo portable console. *Tennis* is great fun and arguably the equal to *Tennis* on the NES, which was also by Nintendo R&D1. You can pull off a surprising amount of shots with just two buttons, while the AI proves to be surprisingly challenging across the four skill levels. It excels as a two-player game though, and Mario himself cameos as an umpire.

REVENGE OF THE 'GATOR 1989

HAL LABORATORY

This is arguably one of the best pinball games on the Game Boy. It has a cute crocodile theme, some charming physics and a well-designed pinball with a pleasing amount to do. The table itself is four screens high and a good size, while there are three additional bonus screens to tackle. It also features an excellent multiplayer game where you must reduce your opponent's points to zero.





SUPER MARIO LAND 1989

NINTENDO R&D1

Mario's first Game Boy outing is a doozy. The visuals may be rather pathetic but they mask some truly excellent platforming shenanigans which would be perfectly at home on a bigger console. There's some decent variety to the gameplay too, with Mario leaping into a ship at several points for some good old fashioned blasting action.

TETRIS 1989

BULLET-PROOF SOFTWARE

With a maddeningly catchy theme tune and highly addictive gameplay it is perhaps little wonder that *Tetris* went on to shift over 30 million units. The nature of Alexy Pajitnov's game makes it perfect for playing on the go, while the two game modes (score chasing and removing a set amount of lines) ensures endless replay value.





BATMAN 1990

SUNSOFT

Loosely based on Tim Burton's classic film, Sunsoft's adaptation is an unexpectedly good run-and-gun that plays quite similarly to Nintendo's *Super Mario Land*. While the sprites are dinky, they're extremely well animated and full of character. The level design is tight and there's a great selection of power-ups.

DOUBLE DRAGON 1983

TECHNOS JAPAN

All three *Double Dragon* games are on the Game Boy, but the original is the best. While it's not arcade accurate, it nonetheless does a great job of capturing all the scrappyness of its arcade parent. It even manages to cram all the moves into a two-button set up as well. It plays best with a second player, but there's enough variety to keep a single player scrapping to the end.





GAME BOY ADD-ONS Try these peripherals



GAME BOY PRINTER

1998

The Game Boy Printer was released alongside the camera, being used to print out its images. It's also compatible with a number of Game Boy and Game Boy Color games. It's compatible with every type of Game Boy, with the exception of the Game Boy Micro and uses 3.8cm thermal paper with adhesive backing, meaning you can easily make stickers. It's a neat device, but it was power hungry, requiring 6 AA batteries.



SUPER GAME BOY

1994

This rather smart device is the predecessor to the GameCube's Game Boy Player. The Super Game Boy allows Game Boy games to be played on the SNES. Not only that, several games, such as *Kirby's Dream Land 2* and *Donkey Kong* feature expanded, superior sound. Additionally, several games such as *Killer Instinct* and *Wario Blast* let the player use a SNES controller for two-player games.



GAME BOY CAMERA

1998

Although the Game Boy Camera was a neat device, it was sadly under-used by Nintendo. It connects to the cartridge port and is able to take very basic photos that utilise the four colour palette of the Game Boy. It's possible to add a number of different lens effects to your images and you can apply stamps to images too. Finally, there is a selection of basic, but fun mini-games that can be played.

HEIANKYO ALIEN 1990

MELDAC

This fun little puzzle game has you trapping aliens by digging holes for them to fall into. Once trapped you fill the holes in to kill the alien. It's a fun concept, and would help influence the likes of *Space Panic* and *Lode Runner* in later years. The levels are extremely well designed with plenty of opportunities to outwit foes, and there's an arcade port included too.





GARGOYLE'S QUEST: GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS 1990

CAPCOM

This interesting spinoff of the *Ghosts 'N Goblins* series has you play as one of the franchise's bad guys. It splits standard side-on platforming with the overhead adventuring and blends them surprisingly well. It's a tough game in places, but the imaginative level design and challenging gameplay keeps you thoroughly absorbed in the action.







F-1 RACE 1984

MIKE SINGLETON

It's not the prettiest of games but there's a huge amount of gameplay crammed into Nintendo's racer. It boasts an exhausting Grand Prix mode, the ability to race in Time Trials and even caters for up to four players for some furious competitive racing. The Game Boy's best racing game.

BALLOON KID 1990

NINTENDO R&D1

The sequel to *Balloon Fight* expands on the original premise by turning it into a side scrolling action game where you must collect balloons whilst avoiding spikes, fire, birds and numerous other hazards. It's a solid game, with some very challenging level design. The traditional one-on-one balloon popping action is kept for the enjoyable two-player mode.



> "ALTHOUGH THE GAME BOY CAMERA WAS A NEAT DEVICE, IT WAS SADLY UNDER-USED BY NINTENDO"



BUBBLE GHOST 1990

PONY CANYON

A delightful game where you play as a ghost that must guide a bubble to safety, navigating increasingly tougher obstacle courses. You can only interact with the bubble by blowing on it and must take care not to move it into harm's way. It's an incredibly charming adaptation of Christophe Andreani's original and is perfectly suited to the system.

GODZILLA 1990

COMPILE

This is an utterly odd use of the *Godzilla* licence, but entertaining all the same. You play as a cute version of the popular monster and must navigate vines, ladders and platforms to destroy a set number of boulders while avoiding numerous enemies (from the Showa generation). Once he's punched them all to pieces, a tile will reveal the location of the next level. Although incredibly bizarre, it plays extremely well, being a port of an old MSX *Godzilla* game.



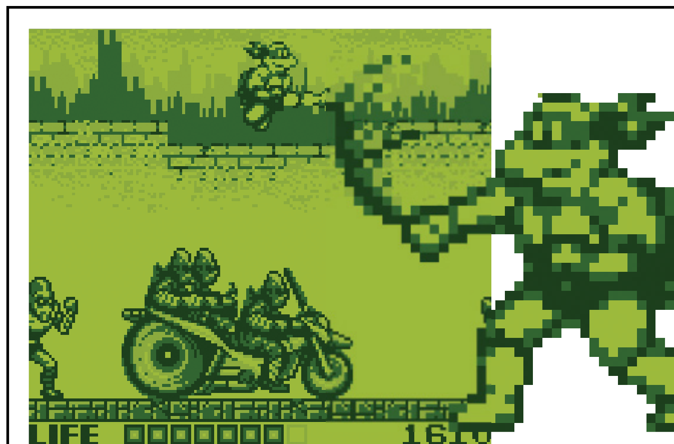


PENGUIN WARS 1990

ASCII

This utterly bonkers game has your penguin trying to beat a selection of different animals by throwing balls at them. Get all 10 balls on your opponent's side and you win. It's easier said than done though as you can get temporarily stunned by incoming balls. Crazy fun, especially in two-player mode.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: FALL OF THE FOOT CLAN 1990

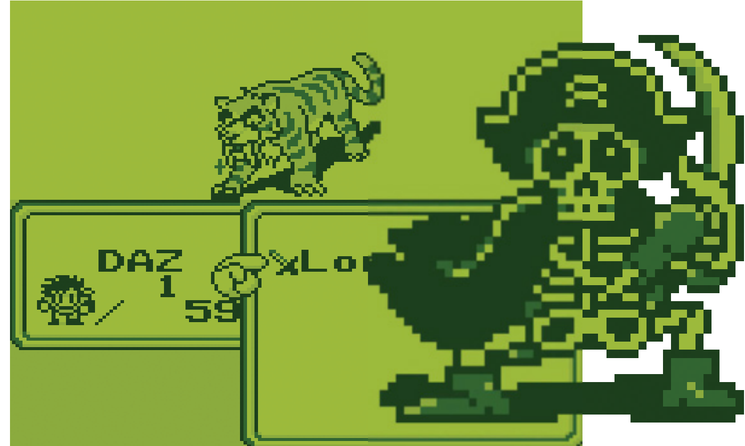
KONAMI

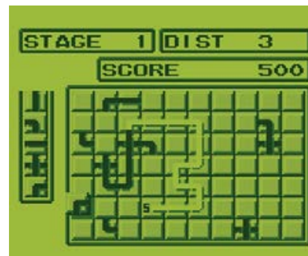
Although Konami released several *Turtles* games on Game Boy, its debut effort is easily the most enjoyable. The action is fast and furious, the sprites are huge and there is a lot of variety to the five available levels. It's possible to play as all four turtles and you can choose which stage you wish to start on. In fact, this ace scrolling fighter is only really let down by a lack of a two-player mode.

FINAL FANTASY LEGEND II 1990

SQUARE

This is easily the best *Final Fantasy* game on Game Boy and possibly its strongest RPG. The story is surprisingly good, the battle system used is relatively flexible (although you'll lose attacks if an enemy dies while others are still alive) and there are plenty of different character classes to master. As with many similar games there's a large overworld to navigate, but it does suffer from too many random encounters. A Nintendo DS remake appeared in 2009.





PIPE DREAM 1990

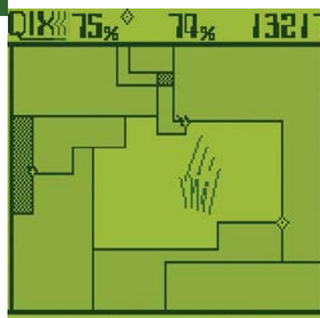
BULLET-PROOF SOFTWARE

This fun puzzle game has you laying a pipeline to contain a never ending supply of ooze. Once the ooze clears a set number of pipes you can move on to the next, trickier stage. It's a highly addictive puzzler that becomes even better when playing against a friend.

QIX 1990

NINTENDO R&D1

This conversion of the *Taito* puzzle game is superb. You effectively control a marker that must convert as much of the playfield as possible by drawing lines. Get hit by the Qix or the enemies patrolling the outside perimeter and you lose a life. It's simple, but *Qix* is very addictive.





R-TYPE 1991

B.I.T.S.

Astonishing is the best way to sum up Jas Austin's stunning port of Irem's arcade game. It replicates the bosses, music and wonderful design of the original enemies and is amazingly balanced too. It doesn't contain every element of the original, but very little is left out. It would go on to receive an equally impressive DX port on Game Boy Color.





CONTRA 1991

KONAMI

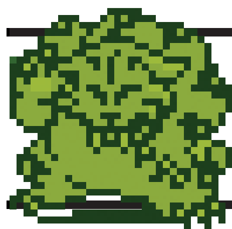
The first *Contra* on a portable system is excellent. The action switches between top-down and side-on views, the graphics are extremely impressive, while the pace is fast and furious. Interestingly, the Japanese version lets you select the first four levels (you'll need the Konami Code for other regions).

WAVE RACE 1992

NINTENDO EAD/PAX SOFTNICA



This fun top-down racer is a little easy but is endlessly replayable due to its excellent course designs. Like *Mario Kart* there are various CC classes to master and it also caters for up to four players via link cable. In addition to the standard race courses, it's also possible to take part in slaloms.



"THE FIRST CONTRA ON A PORTABLE SYSTEM IS EXCELLENT"



FINAL FANTASY ADVENTURE 1991

SQUARE

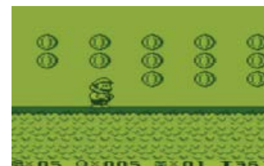
Also known as *Mystic Quest*, *Final Fantasy Adventure* is the first game in the *Mana* series. It's an engaging adventure that builds on the *Zelda* games but adds more RPG mechanics like its *Final Fantasy* parent. It introduces an AI helper character (which would appear in later games) and also allowed you to kill villagers, which was quite the rarity at the time. It's succeeded by several sequels.

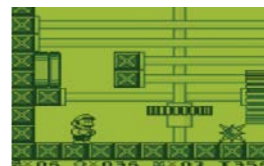
SUPER MARIO LAND 2: 6 GOLDEN COINS 1992

NINTENDO R&D1



A gigantic improvement over *Super Mario Land* and one of the Game Boy's biggest games thanks to its huge 4 megabits cartridge. It adds amazing visuals, a large number of levels, challenging bosses and introduces the villain Wario, who would prove so popular he would take over for the sequel.





THE CODER

Jas Austin on Nintendo's micro marvel



What was the Game Boy like to code for compared to 8-bit micros?

I found the transition fairly straightforward. I had previously coded on the ZX Spectrum, and the Game Boy was also based on the Z80 processor.

This meant that I didn't need to learn a whole new machine code language. However, it did of course bring me some unique new challenges, mostly with the Game Boy's hardware support. It was the first time I worked on a machine that had the luxury of hardware sprites and scrolling.

What were the system's key strengths?

I feel its strengths lie mostly in its simple design, both for the player and us developers. While it did have hardware support for scrolling and sprites, it was pretty basic. This forced us coders to think outside of the box to get the most out of the machine.

What were its weaknesses?

As with a lot of the older systems, its main weakness was memory size. Trying to squeeze the games in was always a struggle. Another weakness was its sprite support. Even though it had hardware sprites, there was not only a limit to how many were available screen, there was also a limit to how many could be in a line before they would start to flicker. In *R-Type* for example, I used quite a sneaky method to display more than the hardware was designed to. Because of the nature of the LCD screen, when a sprite was turned off it would take a split second to fade away. I used this quirk to show sprites on alternate frames, effectively doubling the number I could display at once.

Why was it such a popular system do you think?

I would put this down to the fact that it was a truly portable games system. Around the same time there was also the Sega Game Gear, and while it had superior graphics with its full colour screen, this also caused it to have terrible battery life. Nintendo clearly saw the importance of play time, even over graphical quality. Not forgetting it also had some fantastic games… *Zelda*, *Mario*, *Metroid*, *Pokémon* and *Tetris* to name but a few.

AVENGING SPIRIT 1992

JALECO

A great conversion of Jaleco's obscure coin-op. While it's a standard run-and-gun, it introduces a ghost that appears when you die. You then have a limited amount of energy to find a new host so you can continue your quest. It's a great concept, helped by solid gameplay, smart cartoony visuals and some very smart level design.







TRIP WORLD 1992

SUNSOFT

This excellent adventure shares similarities with Sunsoft's *Gimmick!*. Your cute bunny-like Yakopoo can transform into three different forms on the fly in order to navigate the game's harsh environments. He has additional forms available via power-ups. There's great variety to *Trip World*'s five gigantic stages, while the graphics and sound are exceptionally good. We highly recommend it.

X 1992

NINTENDO EAD

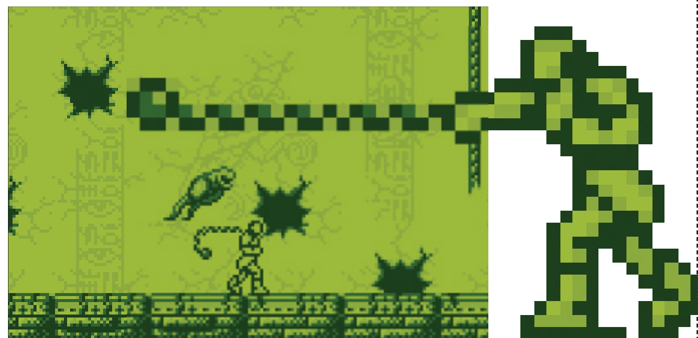
This impressive wireframe shooter was inspired by the *Starglider* series. Designed by Argonaut's Dylan Cuthbert, it has the player completing a number of different training missions that range from escorting cargo to shooting down enemies. Interestingly, it was originally known as *Lunar Chase*, and the US prototype is quite different.



CASTLEVANIA II: BELMONT'S REVENGE 1991

KONAMI

Although still short, this improves greatly on Konami's first Game Boy *Castlevania* game. It features better visuals, more weapons from the series and far better music. It's still tough in places with some annoying spawning enemies, but you can choose which level you start on. Like *Contra* and several other games it would pop up on Konami's Game Boy *Collection* series.



TRACK & FIELD 1992

KONAMI

This update of the classic arcade is superb. The graphics are well detailed and exceptionally animated, while there are a total of 11 different events to compete in. Events can be tackled separately or in a lengthy campaign, while the multiplayer mode is excellent. It's easily one of the Game Boy's best sports games.

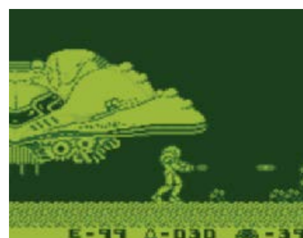


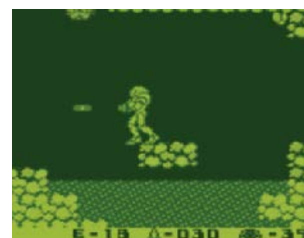


MR DO! 1992

OCEAN SOFTWARE

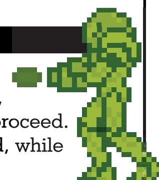
This is an impressive conversion of the ageing arcade game that adds a remix mode and makes the playing area larger to compensate for the Game Boy's small screen. It's otherwise classic *Mr Do*, with your clown nabbing cherries and using apples to keep the nasties away. A fresh revamp of a 10-year-old game.





METROID II: RETURN OF SAMUS 1991

NINTENDO R&D1



Metroid II may not have impressed as much as its predecessor, but time has proven it to be a great game, with Samus having to kill a set amount of Metroids to proceed. The levels are atmospheric and begging to be explored, while the enemies and bosses are suitably challenging.



MEGA MAN III 1992

MINAKUCHI ENGINEERING

This solid platformer takes elements from both *Mega Man 3* and *4* on the NES. It allows Mega Man to use his robotic dog Rush and features four bosses from each game. It's certainly hard in places, but never frustratingly so.

KIRBY'S PINBALL LAND 1993

HAL LABORATORY

This *Kirby* take on pinball is superb thanks to three vastly different pinball tables, plenty of clever play mechanics, great boss fights and a variety of entertaining mini-games. It's known in Japan as *Kirby No Pinball*.





KID DRACULA 1993

KONAMI

This cute platformer is a spin-off of Konami's popular *Castlevania* series. The graphics are far more charming though, while the featured music is a jauntier remake of the franchise's classic tunes. It's a sequel to the Japan-only Famicom game *Demon Castle Special: Kid Dracula* with tough gameplay that belies its cute exterior.



WARIO LAND: SUPER MARIO LAND 3 1994

NINTENDO R&D1



The linear routes of the original *Super Mario Land* return, but this is otherwise a vastly different platformer thanks to Wario's unique skills. It looks superb too, while Wario can pick up three unique helmets that enhance his abilities even further. There are multiple endings too, depending on the amount of money Wario collects during play.

DONKEY KONG 1994

NINTENDO EAD

Created to work with the Super Game Boy, this is a stunning update of *Donkey Kong* that sees Mario collecting keys and carrying them to each stage's locked exit. It builds on the original *Donkey Kong* mechanics giving Mario access to lots of cool new moves.

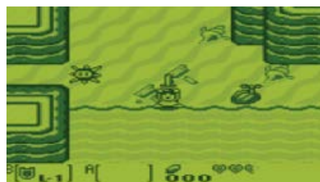




THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING 1993

NINTENDO EAD

It may have taken four years for a *Zelda* game to reach the Game Boy but it was worth the wait. *Link's Awakening* is a superb adventure and every bit as good as its home console peers. Set on Koholint Island, Link must solve the mystery of the Wind Fish by retrieving precious musical instruments. A later DX version in 1998 added an additional dungeon.



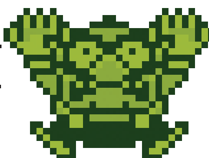


JAMES BOND 007 1998

SAFFIRE

A late release means that many will have missed this enjoyable *Zelda* clone. Bond must travel around the world, solving puzzles, fighting enemies and playing the odd mini-game of Blackjack and Baccarat. It's a little easy, but there are lots of references for fans, including classic villains such as Jaws and Oddjob.

> "IT TOOK FOUR YEARS FOR A ZELDA GAME TO REACH THE GAME BOY BUT IT WAS WORTH THE WAIT"



MONSTER MAX 1994

RARE

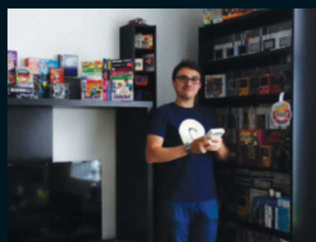
This brilliant isometric adventure is by Jon Ritman, the genius behind *Head Over Heels*. While it doesn't add anything new to the genre, it's very well designed with devious puzzles and imaginatively designed stages to explore. It was originally planned to be part of the *Mario* universe.



THE COLLECTOR

Mathew Boyle loves Nintendo's handheld





Why collect for the Game Boy?

I collect for the Game Boy not only because it was my first console, but because I believe what the Game Boy achieves is gaming at its purest. Under its limitations, the various titles are all about the gameplay and it really shines through in the console's best titles.

Do you collect boxed or cartridges?

I collect mainly cart only, though I will upgrade to a boxed copy of games I love if I see them cheap or it's not much more than the cost of a cart. I've managed to accumulate the full Euro set and am working on the U.S. exclusives before I start on the Japanese titles…

What are the hardest games to collect?

The hardest games are the region specific ones. Games like *Trip World*, *Amazing Tater* and *Mega Man V* are rare, but they're available because they fetch a higher price. Games like *Lingo*, *Hammerin' Harry* and *Bamse* that are specific region-only games, crawl out of the woodwork only once in a blue moon.

How do prices compare to other systems?

Game Boy is sadly on the rise in price, but there are still great games to be had at bargain prices. Go cart only, as boxes for the system can make £10 games into £300 once a box and manual come into the equation.



HARVEST MOON 1997

NATSUME

It might be greatly cut down compared to the SNES original, but *Harvest Moon* works incredibly well on the Game Boy. Carefully managing your farm and trying to get the best out of your many animals becomes thoroughly absorbing, although it lacks the marriage elements of other games in the series.

MOLE MANIA 1996

NINTENDO EAD, PAX SOFTNICA

■ This delightful little game has you trying to navigate a series of maze-like areas. Luckily, your mole's ability to dig into soft ground opens up otherwise unseen ways to navigate the stage. It's full of lovely touches, with your mole having to interact with a variety of different items as his adventure continues.



GAME & WATCH GALLERY 1997

NINTENDO R&D1, TOSE



■ Game Boy's second *Game & Watch* collection features four classics in the form of *Manhole*, *Fire*, *Octopus* and *Oil Panic*. While they're not visually identical to the originals, they do look the part and play extremely well. Modern modes are also included which greatly update the visuals. Two additional sequels followed in 1998 and 1999.

LEGEND OF THE RIVER KING 1997

VICTOR INTERACTIVE SOFTWARE

This excellent little game fuses RPG elements with fishing. It sounds daft but works incredibly well, with your hero fishing his way around the game world so he can catch a mythical fish that will hopefully cure his sister. The fishing itself is strangely compelling, even if it is a little tricky to first get to grips with.







KIRBY'S BLOCK BALL 1995

HAL LABORATORY, NINTENDO R&D1

■ Another fresh *Kirby* take on a well known game – this time, *Breakout*. Unlike similar games, a bat also appears at the top of the screen, which adds a further level of skill. There are also abilities for Kirby to gain, which enable him to destroy indestructible blocks and other hazards, as well as clever mini-games to discover.

POKÉMON RED/BLUE 1996

GAMEFREAK

■ A simple idea that was inspired by Satoshi Tajiri's love of collecting insects turned into one of gaming's most successful franchises. Gamefreak's game not only had thoroughly absorbing gameplay, but also captivated youngsters who loved the collectible aspect. It was remade in 2004 for the Game Boy Advance.



KIRBY'S DREAM LAND 2 1995

HAL LABORATORY



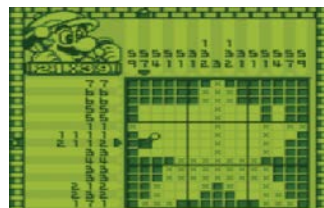
■ HAL greatly improves on its second *Kirby* Game Boy game by adding cool animal buddies for Kirby to ride. Each helper offers Kirby unique abilities, with the skills getting enhanced depending on the enemy ability Kirby might currently have. It's rounded off by excellent visuals and some insanely chirpy music and features Super Game Boy enhancements.

STOP THAT ROACH 1994

KOEI

■ This insane turn-based puzzler has you trying to stop roaches from eating various cakes. You only have a set number of options each turn and only a few moves, meaning a fair amount of strategy is required to achieve your goal each stage. It gets very tough, but the clever puzzles keep you hooked for a long time.





MARIO'S PICROSS 1995

JUPITER, NINTENDO

■ This is Nintendo's take on the popular puzzle game *Picross*. It works extremely well on the Game Boy thanks to well designed puzzles, slick presentation and four different courses. There are 256 puzzles in total, meaning it will take an age to finish. The Game Boy sequels were confined to Japan.

MORE TO CONSIDER…

- KWIRK (1989) ATLUS
- NEMESIS (1990) KONAMI
- DAVID CRANE'S THE RESCUE OF PRINCESS BLOBETTE (1990) IMAGINEERING
- BURGERTIME DELUXE (1991) DATA EAST
- FINAL FANTASY ADVENTURE (1991) SQUARE
- SUPER HUNCHBACK (1992) OCEAN
- PRINCE OF PERSIA (1992) BRØDERBUND
- BATTLETOADS (1994) RARE
- TETRIS ATTACK (1996) INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
- CASTLEVANIA LEGENDS (1997) KONAMI

BEHIND THE SCENES



There's a place… the spine of the world. Cold, desolate and unforgiving, it is the setting for a tale of epic deeds and tragic history. games™ shall tell you of such a tale – welcome, weary traveller, to the legend of Icewind Dale…


RPG rule no. 23: All games must contain a tavern.


Some of Kevin Llewelyn's superb concept art.



Released: 2000
Format: PC and Mac
Publisher: Interplay
Key Staff: Josh Sawyer, Matt Norton, Stephen Bokkes, Scott Warner (design), David Ray, Jacob Devore, Thomas French, Richard Finegan (coding) Chris Avellone (script, manual & technical design), Jeremy Soule (music), Chris Parker (producer), Kevin Llewellyn and others (art)

THE STORY OF ICEWIND DALE BEGINS IN 1998, TWO YEARS BEFORE IT APPEARED ON THE SHELVES OF YOUR VALIANT LOCAL GAMES SHOP. Released to critical acclaim and massive sales figures, *Baldur's Gate* turned the RPG genre on its head, its five discs encompassing an expansive and involving story, spattered with swords and sorcery action and an advanced engine called Infinity running the show beneath its vibrant world. The success of *Baldur's Gate* meant a sequel was inevitable, yet with a workable and adaptable engine in place, it was clear further games in the Forgotten Realms could prove popular.

However, first came *Planescape Torment*. A superb mix of macabre RPG, the Infinity engine and a heavily-altered version of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* second edition ruleset, the game was a hit with critics, but not so with gamers. Lead designer on Planescape was Chris Avellone. "Planescape at that point had largely broken me and my health," he grimaces. "Although it didn't help, I was working on *Fallout 2* at the same time." Fortunately, Interplay's vice president, Trish Wright, instructed Avellone to take it easy and stop working so late. "I was grateful that she was compassionate enough to swing by," notes Avellone. Soon he would be lending his talents to miscellaneous areas within *Icewind Dale*, a project that would prove to be a relatively calmer experience for the young designer.

The nature of *Icewind Dale*'s development meant that, for once, the technical side remained an easier ride for those involved, as opposed to design. Working at parent company Interplay was coder David Ray.

"I'd been in the VR Sports department, working on *Interplay Baseball 2000* when I was moved over to Black Isle and *Fallout 3*," he remembers. When the sequel in the post-apocalyptic franchise was ultimately cancelled, Ray remained at Black Isle and was put to work on *Icewind Dale* instead. "I was a huge R.A. Salvatore fan and had read the *Icewind Trilogy* back in the early nineties," he continues. "I'd also been GMing a D&D campaign set in the Forgotten Realms for several years, so the idea of being involved in making the digital version made me kind of giddy."

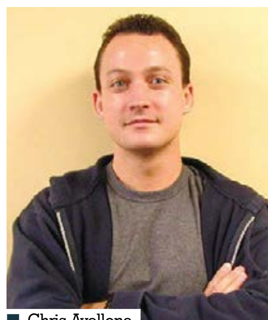
Several ideas had been brainstormed prior to Black Isle settling on the backdrop of the realm's harshest region.

"I'd worked on a number of projects at Interplay in a limited capacity," says Avellone, "and a variety of cancelled and shelved Forgotten Realms titles – of which there were many and in some of the weirdest parts of the Realms too." Another designer on *Icewind* was Stephen Bokkes and he recalls how the initial concept came about.

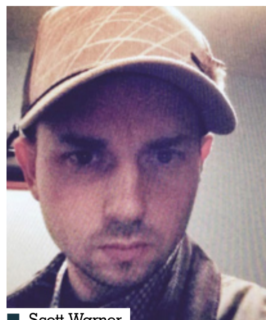
A NUMBER OF US WERE AVID D&D FANS, SO ANOTHER FORGOTTEN REALMS CAMPAIGN SEEMED LIKE PERFECT SENSE

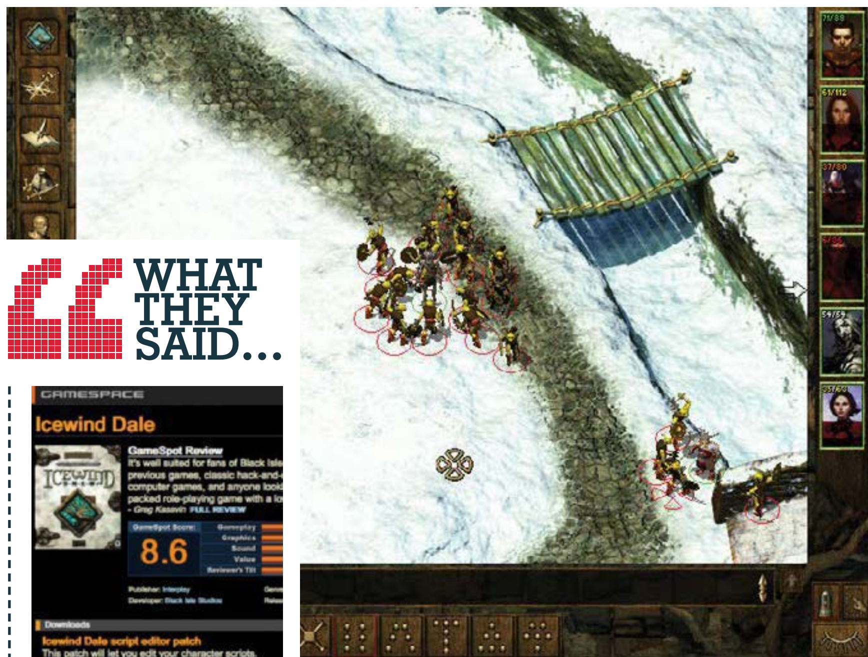
"At the time, Black Isle Studios was close to wrapping up *Planescape: Torment*. Our next project was *Fallout 3*, but it was decided that we had the budget and resources for an interim project of smaller scope and scale that would allow us to transition team members between projects more effectively." Given the long-standing relationship with Wizards Of The Coast, it made sense to utilise another of its properties. "A number of us were avid D&D fans, so another Forgotten Realms campaign seemed like perfect sense," continues Bokkes. "After a few days, sleepless nights and preliminary concept work, the Dragon Spear project was born."

The original title for the project was Dragonspear Castle, its name derived from an obscure location within the Forgotten Realms. "We were told to expect a small team and a short development cycle of less than twelve months," Bokkes explains, "and as such,


Chris Avellone


David Ray


Scott Warner

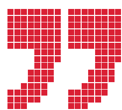


WHAT THEY SAID...



Ultimately, its story makes Icewind Dale all the more satisfying and its exciting action makes its occasional problems negligible. There's always a purpose behind all the hacking and slashing, which makes the gameplay seem rewarding and challenging, rather than like a cheap thrill

Gamespot, 2000



the initial game concept was pretty much a straightforward dungeon crawler, heavy on combat encounters and light on story and dialogue." Yet while this concept changed little during development, many of its team felt the scope of the game was too narrow and the setting too little known.

Bokkes continues, "After a bit of hair-pulling, arguing and convincing – [in other words,] collaboration – between us, the management and Wizards Of The Coast, we agreed to revisit the concept. I came up with a list of settings and locations that I considered more interesting and worthy of an adventure of the Forgotten Realms. The Moonshae Isles and Icewind Dale were the team's top two choices on the list, and being an unapologetic fanboy of Salvatore's novels, I rejoiced when we ultimately went with Icewind Dale."

For those not familiar with the Forgotten Realms, *Icewind Dale* takes place in Faerun, a continent to the north of a world called Abeir-Toril, or Toril. Known also as the Barbaric North or the Savage Frontier, Icewind Dale contains numerous large caverns of former dwarfish strongholds and ruins of long-dead cultures, separated from the rest of Faerun by a wall of jagged peaks known as the Spine of the World. Peppered by a steady stream of brave souls looking to explore, or simply those wishing to escape the rigid laws and taxes of the temperate southern lands, it is a place where nature rules, in the form of huge mountains and elongated lengths of alpine forests. Yet settlements exist despite the desolateness; linking the towns of Easthaven and Kuldahar is Kuldahar Pass, the main route throughout the north, and *Icewind Dale*'s tale takes place here, and on the plains of the Dale itself.

Centuries ago, barbarian tribes such as the Uthgardt and Reghedmen lived on Icewind's expanses and forged a difficult yet independent existence. When an archmage known as Arakon arrived, complete with a mercenary army and intent on conquering the northern wastes, a fierce battle ensued that initially favoured the wizard's forces. However, the tide turned decisively when the barbarian tribes, united by a shaman known as Jerrod, drove back the mercenaries, forcing Arakon into one last desperate act.

As the barbarian army surrounded the archmage, he summoned all of his power and tore open the planar boundaries, opening up a portal to the lower planes. Materialising from this conduit came forth a horde of hideous demons, intent on slaying any creature they set their devilish eyes upon. Struck by a vision from his God, Tempus, Jerrod forced his way through the demons and into the portal itself – his blood combining with its energy to fuse the gateway shut. However, as the introduction to *Icewind Dale* portentously states, this is not the end of the story, but merely the beginning.

To this backdrop enters a party of warriors, created completely by the player. Each character can be designed from race to colour, class, alignment and skills. "The idea of building every single party member was new," remembers Avellone, "and while it bogged down the opening of the game, it was still fun to build everyone from scratch. I enjoyed it, anyway!"

MUCH OF THE GAME WAS NOT MOTIVATED BY WHAT WAS ESSENTIAL, BUT MORE BY WHAT WE COULD DO WITH THE TIME AND RESOURCES

The initial storyline was put together by Bokkes and Josh Sawyer, who also generated the game's preproduction design documentation. As production began in earnest, Bokkes focused primarily on the design of the major quest hubs (Easthaven and Kuldahar) and the level design for several encounter areas. Despite using an existing



Expansion *Heart Of Winter* was even tougher.

engine, *Icewind Dale*'s purpose restricted what could be achieved in terms of design.

Avellone recalls that, "Much of the game was not motivated by what was essential, but more by what we could do with the time (not much of it) and resources (much less than *Baldur's Gate* in terms of personnel and budget) and yet still feel compelling. *Icewind Dale* was designed to get product out fast and keep Interplay afloat during difficult times."

David Ray was the lead programmer and responsible for the adaptations to the infinity engine. "We were using what we called Baldur's Gate 1.5," he reveals. "It was the latest engine and had many of *Baldur's Gate II*'s features, but not all of them. A lot of our engineering time was spent working out the kinks in the new features and massaging them to work without complications. One of the notable things we did was in the rendering engine. They had implemented OpenGL to support faster rendering when you had a 3D card, but we wanted to support some of the new features without requiring a 3D graphics card."

3D cards were fast becoming commonplace but were still expensive. Icewind Dale's separate software renderer ensured everybody could experience the game's new magical spell effects.

Other additions and amendments were plentiful, if minor. As Ray explains, "We created a few new animation sequences that weren't in *Baldur's Gate* and many of the spells required updated code paths, but it was mostly the same engine, we just added a few whistles and bells." By creating the type of game that the Infinity engine was essentially designed for and coupled with Black Isle's experience on *Planescape: Torment* the project moved forwards smoothly from this point of view, save the odd ambitious design element that the system could not handle. "I'm a huge dragon nerd," smiles Ray, "and there was a lot of talk about putting this huge dragon in the game. But I was the one that killed the idea because I felt like we couldn't do it justice with the technical limitations and time constraints. I was a little sad about it, but I still feel it was the right decision to make at the time." A collection of screen-enveloping dragons would eventually appear in both *Baldur's Gate II* and *Icewind Dale II*.

Design proved even more troublesome, with enthusiastic ideas often drowned out by the restrictions of the Infinity engine.

"Most of the issues were over time," says Avellone, "and we had arguments about aspects of the style guide. Even though it was a dungeon crawler, I didn't have much tolerance for goofiness in the game, which chafed a bit, especially if it got in the way of an otherwise well-scripted dramatic moment. We kind of gave up on this stance as it vanished during the chaos of *Icewind Dale II*, where it did get kind of goofy." Another aspect Avellone regrets is that a time-saving tokenised system was only employed later on. "It meant the game could read the spell and item data files associated with the spell [or] item and automatically assign the designer-set properties such as duration, damage and class usage," he explains. "It would then import it into the outward-facing text descriptions. [This] made it so much easier, eliminating the need to enter and finalise data by hand and helping reduce bugs."

MUMMY ISSUES

Chris Avellone explains how one small change caused the whole team several big headaches

"SO: MUMMIES. ANY *Dungeons and Dragons* player worth half a copper piece knows that mummies cause disease, right? Well, we didn't have disease in *Icewind Dale*. At the start. Then someone mentioned it and it got included. And disease is like a poison, right? And it's easy to add. It was. And the next day, it started murdering all the testers' characters, like a slow-moving power word: kill. Do you know why? Because no-one realised that we needed a *cure* for disease. One hit, one failed save roll and the unfortunate character would see its life force slowly sapped away. Realistic? Maybe. Fun? No.

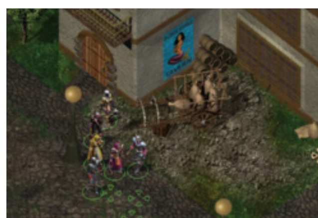
"You wanted to kill your avatar yourself, because it was too painfully unheroic to watch. So a cure was added in the spell 'cure disease' (obviously). That's easy too, right? I mean you add some new spells, but uh-oh, wait... you have to make sure the paladins can do it too. And what if you don't have anyone in your party that can cast 'cure disease'? We needed some items that could do the same thing and not just priest scrolls, but potions, charms and so on.

"We had to make sure they were easily obtainable and then we needed to add it to the priest interfaces in towns as well, just in case…and on it went, and that is the mummy's tale, how one seemingly simple, easy addition caused a shitload of work to balance it. I encourage any budding designer to heed this, because even the smallest additions to a game is like introducing a new insect into a fragile new ecology. The insect may turn out to be ill-suited and die. It may thrive. It may also be a vicious predator that devours the entire new ecology around it. And then, to add insult to injury, the little pest may turn into the worst of pests, it may turn into a mummy."

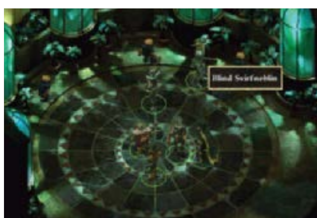


Some of the *Icewind Dale* team. From back left: Stephen Bokkes, Josh Sawyer, Scott Warner, Chris Avellone, John Deiley, Reg Arnedo.

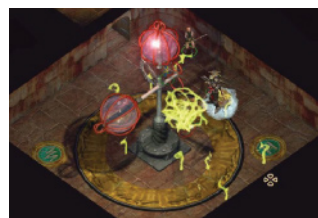
> A GAMING EVOLUTION Baldur's Gate > Icewind Dale > Baldur's Gate 2



Baldur's Gate set the standard and unleashed the isometric infinity engine upon the world. *Icewind Dale* simplified the gameplay.



This was a stepping stone to *Baldur's Gate 2*, which contained grander effects, characters and a very in-depth plot.



Avellone also contributed a number of elements to several major characters, he helped compose the narrative style guide, tweaked dialogue and proofed script implementation and checklists.

"I had about a 30-row long checklist table for every dialogue in the game to run through for fixes," he recalls, "and although that may sound boring, I love that stuff when I'm not writing – or not in the mood to write [anyway]. I also wrote the manual, which everyone should do for a game at least once because doing that during the last months of a game is a hellish obstacle course of tracking spell and item information to make sure everything is correct. And a lot of systems can change and be rebalanced during that timeframe."

Upon release, *Icewind Dale* was not without its critics. Many decried its simplicity after the plot-heavy and character-focused *Baldur's Gate*, others highlighted some of the technical deficiencies of the infinity engine, such as its sometimes dubious pathfinding, that had irritatingly re-appeared from its forebear. The development team, perhaps sensing that *Icewind Dale* lacked depth, made the game extremely tough, another fact that was noted at the time. There's no doubt that charging full-on into many of the tricky battles would soon see several darkened portraits. Sneaking a thief forward and drawing out enemies one by one was a tactic many players picked up on, but this was not one anticipated by the development team.

"I personally liked emergent behaviour in games," declares David Ray, "and I can appreciate it when players can do things that the developers didn't think of. I don't recall if any of us thought of that specifically, but I'm kind of glad it worked."

Avellone notes of this method, "It may not be realistic, but [such] challenges that force you to re-examine 'charge!' strategies really make a designer's day. One of the most fun aspects of the *Icewind Dale* series was layering new ways of undermining these challenges. For example, once it became clear that a number of testers and players were using animal and elemental summon mobs to be their front line tanks, it wasn't hard adjusting the key spellcasters and enemy mages so they would dispel first and ask questions later."

Despite the criticisms, *Icewind Dale* scored well and proved there was a market hungry for its wide breadth of free-roaming adventuring. The game even survived a similar release date to another highly-anticipated RPG in *Diablo II*, with some remarking that maybe this assisted sales in a perverse way, with many gamers eagerly picking up both titles.

TO INFINITY... AND BEYOND!

All about BioWare's popular game engine

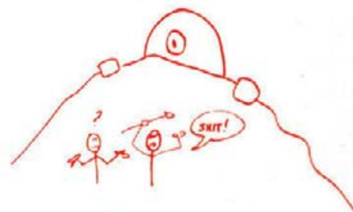
THE INFINITY ENGINE was created at BioWare with the intention of developing isometric role-playing games, initially the game *Battleground Infinity*, which eventually morphed into *Baldur's Gate*.

For gameplay, it used real-time movement combined with semi-real-time combat – the action could be paused at any time for the player to take stock and order their characters. Graphically, the isometric viewpoint used pre-rendered 2D backgrounds with sprite characters and permitted intricate detail on both.

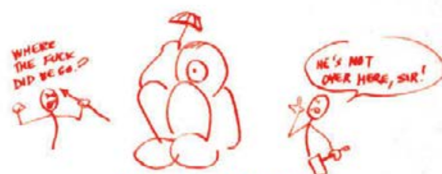
After *Baldur's Gate*, an updated version (1.5 as the team called it) was used for *Icewind Dale* with refinements and additions included for *Baldur's Gate* sequel, *Shadow Of Amn*. However, with 3D graphics cards gaining increased popularity in the late 90s and early 00s, the engine soon began to look dated and it was succeeded by BioWare's Aurora Engine. This proved the basis for many future games to come, although its first iteration, *Neverwinter Nights*, received some very mixed reviews.











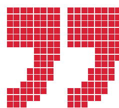
The team desperately tried to create a playable cyclops race. Sadly it never even made it to the sequel.

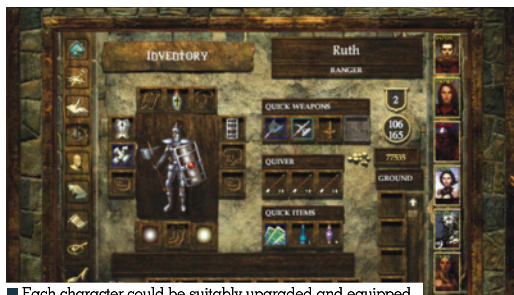
WHAT THEY SAID...



Icewind Dale isn't an earth-shatteringly original game, but the overall package is so skilfully crafted that this doesn't matter one iota. Role-players have never had it so good

Eurogamer, 2000





Each character could be suitably upgraded and equipped.


Several NPCs, such as Arundel, help the player discover the scourge of the dale.




Learning from history: Everard makes the same ultimate sacrifice as barbarian shaman Jerrod many years before him.

"*Diablo II* was gonna slaughter us in the action RPG arena," says Avellone, "and it was almost something you expected, not dreaded." Nevertheless, the game sold credibly, assisted by the public's familiarity with its gameplay style and engine. In all, there is little that those involved would change about *Icewind Dale* itself.

"It was what it was," says Avellone, "and for that, it was pretty well sized and scoped, except for the system changes. I probably would have left some of those alone in hindsight, so the programmers weren't on the verge of divorce from the long hours."

David Ray cites the user interface as something that could have been modernised. "Updating the UI was something we had wanted to do while we were working on it," he recalls, "but we did a cost/benefit on it and decided it was something we couldn't fit into the schedule." For the development team, *Icewind Dale* represents a variable point in their careers. Avellone laments the role the game played as a bridge to other projects, when perhaps making a start on further *Baldur's Gate* games, or even *Fallout: Van Buren* may have seen those franchises flourish at Interplay.

EVEN THOUGH IT WAS A DUNGEON CRAWLER, I DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TOLERANCE FOR GOOFINESS IN THE ICEWIND DALE

"We had tons of fun with it, but honestly it wasn't a ground-breaking game – just fun. But lest I sound like Debbie Downer, fun's the thing and not every game has to set out to change the world. Players enjoyed it, we had fun making it and that's what counts," Avellone remembers fondly.

For programmer David Ray, having been cornered into developing sports games, working on *Icewind Dale* was a breath of (icy) fresh air and sparked a career of development on similar titles, including the phenomenally successful *World Of Warcraft*.

Interplay followed *Icewind Dale* with the expansion *Heart Of Winter* which was, incredibly, even tougher than the original game, if a little on the brief side. After another (free) expansion entitled *Trials Of The Luremaster*, a proper sequel was released in 2002. Essentially more of the same, it sold steadily, but not enough to save Black Isle Studios, before publisher Interplay itself became quite the story over the remainder of the decade. But that, brave adventurer, is a tale for another time.


The mission takes the party to Dragon's Eye, a mountain infested by human-hating lizard creatures.

MINH ON FIRST MEETING COUNTER-STRIKE COCREATOR JESS CLIFFE



■■■ WHEN WE FIRST met with Valve and agreed to give them the rights to *Counter-Strike*, [Jess] Cliffe was still at school. He spent another three years there and then went down to Seattle to start at Valve. It wasn't until three years after we were at Valve that I actually met Cliffe in real life. We'd built a strong relationship by this point, but still, it was surreal.





INTERVIEW

MINH LE

While at university, Minh Le made game mods in his spare time. One such mod of his, Counter-Strike, would go on to become one of the most popular videogames of all time

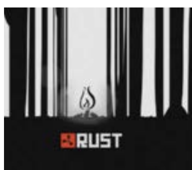
SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Action Quake 2 (1998)
Designer



Counter-Strike (1999)
Cocreator and lead designer



Rust (2013)
Designer

What were your favourite games when you were growing up?
I was really into all sorts of genres. Back then RPGs were a big thing – I really got into *Ultima VII* and the *Wing Commander* series. *Strike Commander* was also another game made by Chris Roberts; I was a huge fan of his games and they were [a] really big part of my gaming experience [when I was] growing up. Obviously, when *Doom* came out that took the whole industry by storm. I was one of the guys that was really influenced by that. And also, the *Rainbow Six* series. There [are] so many [that influenced me].

You taught yourself coding when you were still at university – were you a natural coder or was it something that you struggled with at first?
With programming, it was a bit of a struggle. The first language I learned [was] C++ and I think it took me about a year in my spare time while I was studying. I must've spent around 20 hours a week just picking up the basics and coming to grips with it. I guess you could say it was kinda slow.

You created *Navy Seals Quake* and *Action Quake 2*, two mods that used the original Quake C engine – was it a good engine to work on when you were still learning?
The Quake C engine is a subset of C++ and I think that helped me because it gave me a starting base. When I first picked up Quake C I actually had no programming experience – the only prior experience I had was a little bit of visual BASIC and this was even before I started university, when I was in grade 12. I was pretty raw at the time.

Did you code *Counter-Strike* on GoldSource? If so, how was this different?
Yes, it was the *Half-Life* engine. It was a bit more challenging because there were more modules involved and there was more code [to do]. There was a lot of different code for the rendering and also how it did the networking. It was completely different from Quake C, so not only did I have to learn C++, I actually had to learn how the GoldSource engine worked, which was challenging in and of itself.

I ACTUALLY DIDN'T THINK THAT THEY'D SELL THE GAME, I WAS QUITE NAIVE… SO IT SURPRISED ME

At the time, what were your expectations for *Counter-Strike* – had you even thought of it as something that you would eventually be making some money from?
It was strictly a hobbyist mentality that I had. Even up until the point that Valve contacted us and bought us out, I actually didn't think that

they'd sell the game, I was quite naive. I just thought that they would make another version of it – a *Counter-Strike 2* or something – so it kind of surprised me when they decided to just polish up the existing *Counter-Strike* [that I made] and actually sell it as a standalone game. At the time, the game was a free mod so anyone that had Half Life could just download it. I was shocked that they'd actually want to sell it.



What was the time frame before making *Counter-Strike* and Valve being in touch?
I think it was around beta4 that they contacted me. Beta4 happened [about] a year after I released the very first beta1 so I spent about two years working on *Counter-Strike* beta1, then I spent about three months doing beta2 and beta3 was another few months after that. I spent a few months between each beta.

How did it feel when Valve first showed interest in *Counter-Strike* and approached you when you were just 21 years of age?
It was completely out of this world. I think [my age] might've affected my judgement, I was willing to do anything for them. I think it put me in a position where I probably wasn't thinking rationally. That said, I was elated. I really looked up to them, I still do as a developer, so for a 21-year old, you're on cloud nine.

How different was the mod you had originally worked on to *Counter-Strike* as it appeared in its version 1 form?
At first it was quite bare bones. It didn't contain the bombing scenario, it didn't have a lot of other features, but I think the core game was already there in beta1. For me, the core game was basically all about buying your guns, without respawning, all with a focus on teamwork. I think those were my main gameplay objectives.

What is it about *Counter-Strike* that resonated so much with the modding community?
Back then the modding community was in its infancy and there was a lot of talent out there that had a lot of time on their hands. They didn't really know where to direct it. When a popular game like *Counter-Strike* came out that they were drawn to, they saw the potential in it – the same way I saw the potential in it. There wasn't much competition at the time in terms of popular mods, there was *Team Fortress Classic*, but there was really only it and *Counter-Strike*. I think that allowed us to have a great deal of modders to help us out.



Minh considers *Action Quake 2* to be less serious than *CS* with its distinct focus on the use of explosives in battles.

MINH ON MEETING SOME FANS OF COUNTER-STRIKE OVER THE YEARS:



"I'VE HAD THE pleasure of meeting a lot of people who've said that they [have] been influenced greatly by *Counter-Strike*. It always means a lot to me and as a developer the thing that I enjoy most is seeing other people enjoy your game. The financial part of it is actually a close tie with seeing others enjoy it – all developers [like to see] their games enjoyed."

What effect does having such a vocal community have on you as a developer?
Yeah, it's a challenge. I mean, even today, other games that are open development face the same issues. I'm sure *Minecraft* had similar issues and right now I'm working on *Rust*, where we have the same problems. I think as a game developer you have to recognise [just] how far you can push your design. We were always listening to the community and it wasn't often [that] they'd prevent us from trying something completely new. On this end, we're always looking to try something different, but if the feedback is unanimously negative then we have to listen. You have to get a feel for what is truly bad and what is truly unacceptable.

For the most part, you have to experiment with your ideas and stay true to your vision. It's important to have a consistent vision, something you have in your own mind and not something that's totally influenced by feedback. You're always going to get so many conflicting opinions so it's important to have your own direction, whilst paying attention to what's completely broken. There were instances in *Counter-Strike*'s development where I added a feature that almost everybody disagreed with it. It was obvious when those features came up because the amount of flack I got was incredible.

What was the feature?
It was really lame, it was terrible really. Around beta1 the players had to buy their guns at the


In response to fans, Minh implemented a pre-match grace period to stop top players gaining an upper hand.


The map named cs_dust is one of the most recognised *Counter-Strike* playgrounds and still features in its modern variations.

start of the rounds. A lot of times the people who bought the guns quickest could move first. That was a big problem because the people who were able to shop quicker had an advantage in that they could move first. What I did was slow down the players' movement[s]. It was a terrible solution! Basically, I decreased the players' speed for the first ten seconds and folk thought it was terrible, [it was like] they were running in quicksand. I eventually made a ten second grace period where everyone was [permitted] to buy stuff. The feedback I got for that initial prototype was really negative.

You once made moves to remove bunnyhopping (where players use jumping to move quicker than running) from *Counter-Strike*, but you were met with resistance?
Yeah, that was a very sensitive topic for me. I thought that it really went against what I was going for in *Counter-Strike*. I wanted to emphasise realism and I thought bunnyhopping was almost too comical and it looked a bit too much like *Team Fortress Classic*. I was against it and made various attempts to mitigate it, but it was met with a lot of resistance. I had to tread carefully in that regard. Eventually, we did [reduce] the jumping, but it was never to the point where I wanted it to be. I wanted it to [get rid of it], but what we ended up settling on was something roughly halfway between what I first envisioned and what the community [really] wanted.

The eSports industry is pretty huge now. Was there a scene back then? Did you foresee *Counter-Strike* taking off within that?
I think there may [have been] one league, it was kind of around, but obviously nowhere near as prominent as it is today. The industry was in its infancy. As a developer, I didn't really like eSports because it presented a lot of restrictions on my game design. It required me to balance the game in a certain way and I didn't really enjoy that aspect of it – as a developer you want to be able to have the freedom to try out different things. At the time, eSports was fairly new so it didn't have as much flack as Valve would have today. Everything [that] they do now needs to be eSports-friendly with *Counter-Strike*.





AS A DEVELOPER YOU WANT TO BE ABLE TO HAVE THE FREEDOM TO TRY OUT DIFFERENT THINGS

Could you possibly have foreseen *Counter-Strike*'s popularity lasting until today?
No, not at all. I don't think anyone could've, to be honest. I think Valve saw it, realised it had a simple formula and realised it could be prolonged. The longevity of *Counter-Strike* is something you don't see in a lot of other games. Part of that is the simplicity of it – it's not too complicated, when compared to *DotA* or *LOL*.

What have you found are the main differences and similarities between working on the likes of *Counter-Strike* and *Rust*?
It's really similar, to be honest, not a lot's changed with regards to how the community reacts to things. Typically, communities overreact, but that's a behaviour that's always been [there] – it was the same way back in the early *Counter-Strike* days. It's just a matter of the developer having the patience and strength to put up with the negatives for a few days. If it persists then we know we have a problem.

Your nickname is Gooseman. Where does that come from?
It's from a cartoon that I used to watch when I was a kid. One of my favourite characters was Gooseman from *[The Adventures of the] Galaxy Rangers,* [which was] a sci-fi Western cartoon that was out in the late eighties. A lot of people these days haven't heard of [the programme] and the character was kind of like Clint Eastwood.



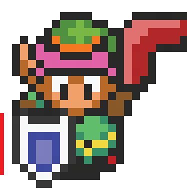




Rust takes a step back from the chaos of war zones and adopts a more survivalist-centric approach.



GAME CHANGERS

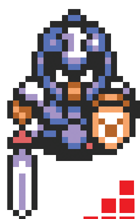


THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST

Released: 21 November 1991 **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo EAD **System:** SNES



The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past will be celebrating its 25 anniversary in 2016, proving once again that Nintendo is more than capable of producing quality that stands the test of time



The action adventure that defined the 16-bit era, A Link To The Past captured the hearts and attention of a generation; its influence is still felt across the gaming landscape today



IT'S DIFFICULT TO even imagine what state the adventure genre would be in now were it not for the release of *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past*. It was a truly pivotal step for a franchise that found itself flagging after a contentious side-scrolling effort in *Zelda II: The Adventures Of Link*. It introduced many of the series' most iconic items and themes, not to mention helping to quickly establish the Super Nintendo Entertainment System as one of the most impressive gaming consoles of all time. *A Link To The Past* is one of the critical reasons the brand carries as much respect and reverence as it does to this day.

It's a testament to *A Link To The Past*'s quality that we are still talking about it with such admiration, almost 25 years since its original November 1991 release in Japan (it arrived in the West a few long months later) under the banner of *The Legend Of Zelda III: The Triforce Of The Gods*. But that sort of quality isn't created overnight. *A Link To The Past* spent over three years in incubation – originally in contention for release on the NES – before development shifted across to the fledgling SNES system.

As if launching on all-new hardware wouldn't have been challenging enough for the creative pairing of Takashi Tezuka and Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo EAD also made a significant stride forward for plastic-encased experiences, with *A Link To The Past* becoming one of the first games to make use of 8-megabit cartridges. Of course, that extra storage space was put to good use; it freed Nintendo developers up to make one of the most detailed and expansive games of the 16-bit era.

The two parallel game overworlds were remarkable, the dozen or so dungeons surprisingly complex, and the variety



BEST BOSS

A LINK TO THE PAST FEATURED WICKED BOSS DESIGN, THESE ARE THREE OF THE BEST



UNEARTHING LANMOLAS

★ These pesky worms caused a ton of problems for players back in the day, with Link having to judge where the three worms would emerge before desperately hacking at them.



BATTLING MOLDORM

★ So beloved was this boss battle that Nintendo saw fit to bring it back for the 3DS sequel *A Link Between Worlds*; Moldorm can only be damaged by slicing away at its tail.



THE MIGHTY GANON

★ After fighting through both worlds, you'll be more than ready to take on Ganon. The battle doesn't disappoint, with the evil being rolling through multiple incarnations.

in boss and enemy types wildly impressive. And to think, it all started with a young boy receiving telepathic messages from a princess locked up in a dungeon by a creepy wizard. It's a little silly, but it also carries an innocence that's lost on modern triple-A design today. Who could forget that first journey into the wild land of Hyrule? Marvelling at the beauty of the 16-bit world while rain lashed down around you; sneaking through the screen-dwarfing Hyrule Castle before first taking up arms with your trusty sword and shield. It's arguably one of the most visually impressive and atmospheric beginnings ever in a Nintendo title.

The tens of hours to be found after that opening gave us one of Link's greatest adventures. Despite being a prequel, it successfully introduced many gameplay mechanics, locations and items that have become hallmarks of the *Zelda* franchise – not to mention inspired swathes of imitators in the years that would follow. The power of the SNES and the increased space on the cartridge meant Nintendo could experiment with the genre, expanding its horizons and successfully escaping the crushing linearity that plagued other adventure games of the era.

For the first time, Link could swing his sword in an arc, as opposed to stabbing clumsily at enemies stationed in front of him, and he could finally pirouette for a stunningly deadly spinning attack, which resulted in more dynamic and challenging enemy encounters to compensate for the young hero's increased prowess. The Master Sword and its rite of worth-proving passage was first introduced here too, as was the trusty Hookshot – for navigating impossible dungeon chasms – the speedy Pegasus boots, pieces of heart, and yes, even the Ocarina were there to be found on your adventure to defeat Agahnim and Ganon.

NINTENDO WAS FREE TO DEVELOP ONE OF THE MOST DETAILED AND EXPANSIVE GAMES OF THE 16-BIT ERA

KEY FACTS

■ Back when the SNES first launched, it was common for developers to make games within the cartridges limited 4-megabit storage space. *A Link To The Past* broke this rule by using 8-Mbit cartridges, giving Nintendo the space required to create a truly expansive world for Link to adventure through.

■ Because the game launched back in the days before the internet, this little secret went completely unnoticed for years; the Chris Houlihan room is a hidden area that you get sent to if the game crashes – named after the winner of a 1990 *Nintendo Power* contest winner.

■■■ Ultimately, *A Link To The Past*'s greatest victory was how it pulled the rug out from under gamers across the world. It cleverly lulled you into a false sense of security; after chasing three magic pendants to release the Master Sword – giving you the power to defeat Agahnim and save the princess – the end felt in sight. That couldn't be further from the truth. Instead, you are whisked away to the Dark World, a mysterious and warped reflection of the Hyrule you'd already spent so many hours exploring and enjoying. Zelda was suddenly locked away in Ganon's Tower and another seven dungeons – each containing a descendant of the mythical Seven Sages – were there to be conquered. Up to this point, gamers had never experienced such opportunity for exploration. You could travel between the Light and Dark Worlds, complete quests, search for rupees and items freely to aid your quest; it was almost as if Nintendo had magically packaged an entire second game into the cartridge.

A Link To The Past has stood the test of time. Spawning numerous re-releases and even a fully-fledged sequel in 2013's *A Link Between Worlds*, it's no surprise that the SNES version is so fondly remembered. It's the game that established many story beats and mechanics that would now be blazingly referred to as RPG clichés if featured in any modern adventure; it created the template that *The Legend Of Zelda* would continue to reuse to great success for over two decades; and, perhaps most impressively, it proved that videogames would no longer need to compromise on their creative visions because of technical limitations. It's as legitimately enjoyable and enthralling to play today as it was when it first released, and that's the sign of a true game-changer.



GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT GAMES THAT EMBRACED A LINK TO THE PAST'S DARK WORLD



THESE GAMES OWE A LOT TO LINK AND HIS JOURNEYS BETWEEN DIMENSIONS





ALAN WAKE (2010)

Hidden beneath the black waters of Cauldron Lake is The Dark Place; *Alan Wake*'s supernatural homage to the dark world of *A Link To The Past*. It's a place where the darkness thrives, causing creative works of art to manifest themselves in reality. It's a twisted mirror image of the natural world and sets the scene for the best moments of Remedy's action thriller.

DEADLY PREMONITION (2010)

A lot of *Deadly Premonition* makes little sense; it's a glorious celebration of the works of David Lynch in a messy adventure. It's also intimately weird in ways Lynch – confined by his chosen format – could never replicate, thanks to what bleeds out of the distorted Otherworld. A complex hallucination or a nightmare made reality? We'll likely never know.



SILENT HILL (1999)

■ Honestly, the entirety of *Silent Hill* could be seen as some dark world parallel of our own, but the Konami classic does have a tendency to shift between two dangerous locales. There's the main state, a fog-shrouded town where horrors lurk in the shadows, and then there's the rusted and bloodied nightmare mirror of it; as if it weren't scary enough already.



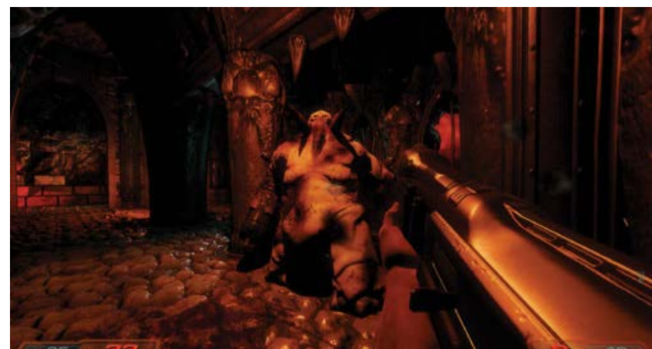
SUPER MEAT BOY (2010)

■ Just as *A Link To The Past* cleverly used a dark world to prolong the game experience, Team Meat used a similar tactic to keep you locked into the finger-breaking nightmare that was *Super Meat Boy.* Once you think you've mastered the game it goes and throws you through a gauntlet of hell in stupidly difficult dark world versions of the original levels.



METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES (2004)

■ *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* was a stunning must-own for the GameCube, but it's also a masterful showcase of how a dark world can enhance a game. The game asks you to venture through dangerous territory as it is, before then forcing you to delve into an arid and bleak mirror of it against tougher enemies and life draining shadows.



DOOM 3 (2004)

■ *Doom 3* is ridiculous, but it's also a fine example of how to scare a generation of gamers silly. As if running and gunning your way through a mutant-infested base on Mars wasn't bad enough, it also has you slipping in and out of the Alternate Dimension Hell, which sees reality flicker, chucking blood-streaked walls, screams and skeletal corpses at you.



DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS (2009)

■ *Dragon Age: Origins* may make itself out to be a high-fantasy adventure for a lot of the time you're with it, but it does have its moments of extreme *The Legend Of Zelda* homage. The Fade is essentially BioWare's dark world; a flawed and corrupt landscape forged by the dreams of doomed spirits and mortals crossing over the void of life and death.



LEGACY OF KAIN: SOUL REAVER (1999)

■ One of the best examples of a dark world integrated fully into a game, *Soul Reaver* saw you diving into a spectral realm to solve difficult puzzles and fight off soul-sucking monsters that would relentlessly hunt you. It cleverly shifted the geography, twisting the landscape to create new paths and routes through the game, albeit with tougher difficulty spikes.

THE VAULT



CHILLBLAST ASCENSION 2

MANUFACTURER: **CHILLBLAST** PRICE: **£1,849.99**

IT'S WISE TO be naturally wary of the purchase of a gaming laptop. While owning such a compact and travel friendly device can prove to be a wonderful companion from the living room to out on the road, they are often obsolete from the second you take it out of the box. That's a difficult reality to swallow when you're no doubt dropping a bomb of money for the privilege of owning something that can't usually be upgraded to play next year's games, unlike a tower or your own personal build of a machine at home.

That's a problem you'll quickly push to the back of your mind once you get Chillblast's Ascension 2 in your hands. This thing is packing the one of the world's most powerful mobile GPUs, a top of the line Intel® Core™ i7 6700K Quad Core Processor, and it's got NVIDIA's GTX 980M 8GB GDDR5 graphics card powering it. To put it simply, this is an impressive piece of technology that remains as vital and powerful now as it did from launch. From *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* to the *Overwatch* beta, we've yet to find any reason to return to our regular PC stack. Sure, it runs a little hot and loud and it's running Windows 10, but that's a price we are willing to pay. Playing games from the comfort of a bed has rarely been better, on a beautiful 1080p 17-inch screen no less.



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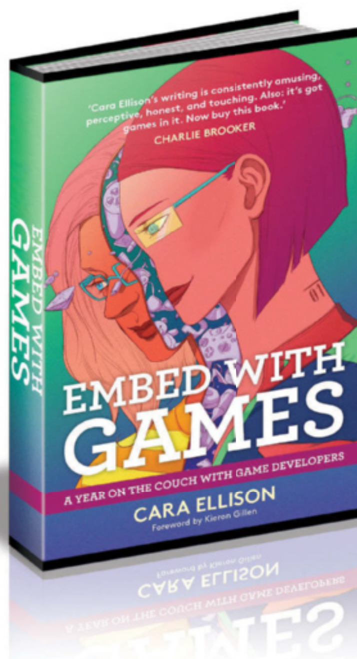


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LOGITECH ISN'T A company you might commonly associate with eSport-ready gaming peripherals, though the Hyperion Fury does a decent enough job of standing shoulder to shoulder with the competition. With eight programmable buttons, on-the-fly DPI shifting and a lightweight design, the Hyperion Fury makes up for its confusing configuration software with a robust feature set and solid accuracy and tracking. If you're an FPS fan, you could do a lot worse than entrusting your headshots to Logitech.
www.gaming.logitech.com

EMBED WITH GAMES

PUBLISHER: **POLYGON BOOKS**



THERE'S ANOTHER SHIFT in videogames journalism on the near horizon. While print magazines will continue to provide long-form features and fantastic access to the biggest up-and-coming games, and the online news hounds will still provide up-to-the-second analysis on which games have failed to provide a 1080p graphical experience for the foreseeable future, it's clear that there's a real hunger for a new angle on the industry. Critic Cara Ellison has taken a first step to providing it, as she took across the world with her life packed into two suitcases to embed herself in the lives of developers.

Embed With Games is an interesting collection of essays that were written from the couches of some of the most interesting developers in both the triple-A and indie scenes; providing insight into their creative process, opinion on the industry and general worldview. At times it's mundane, a welcomed reminder that the people slaving away to create your favourite games are, well, just that, as human as the rest of us.

The essays do have a tendency to become a little self indulgent, though that's a consequence of the style. This book gives a rare glimpse into the lives of, not only 12 developers stationed across the world, but the writer herself. While it has a tendency to stumble at times, *Embed With Games* is a successful breath of fresh air.

VERDICT 8/10



BATTLEFRONT: TWILIGHT COMPANY

Disappointed by the lack of single-player campaign and story in *Star Wars: Battlefront*? BioWare writer Alexander Freed has teamed up with Lucas Books to create this tie-in with the game, letting us follow a group of soldiers caught in the galactic war for freedom.

www.star-wars.suvudu.com



THE ART OF FABLE LEGENDS

It might not be your traditional *Fable* experience, but this Unreal Engine 4 created brawler is the best looking instalment to the franchise yet, and that's why this beautiful art book is a must see. With many playable characters and new worlds, this is a fine collection.

www.lionhead.com



RED VS. BLUE THE ULTIMATE FAN GUIDE

Celebrate the majesty that is *Red Vs. Blue* with this ultimate fan guide from its creators, Rooster Teeth. Character dossiers, fun facts, stupid lists and trivia make this a must-own for any fan. This innovative and groundbreaking show offers plenty of fun moments to recall.

www.redvsblue.com

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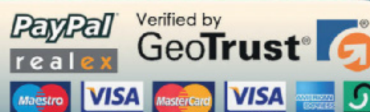
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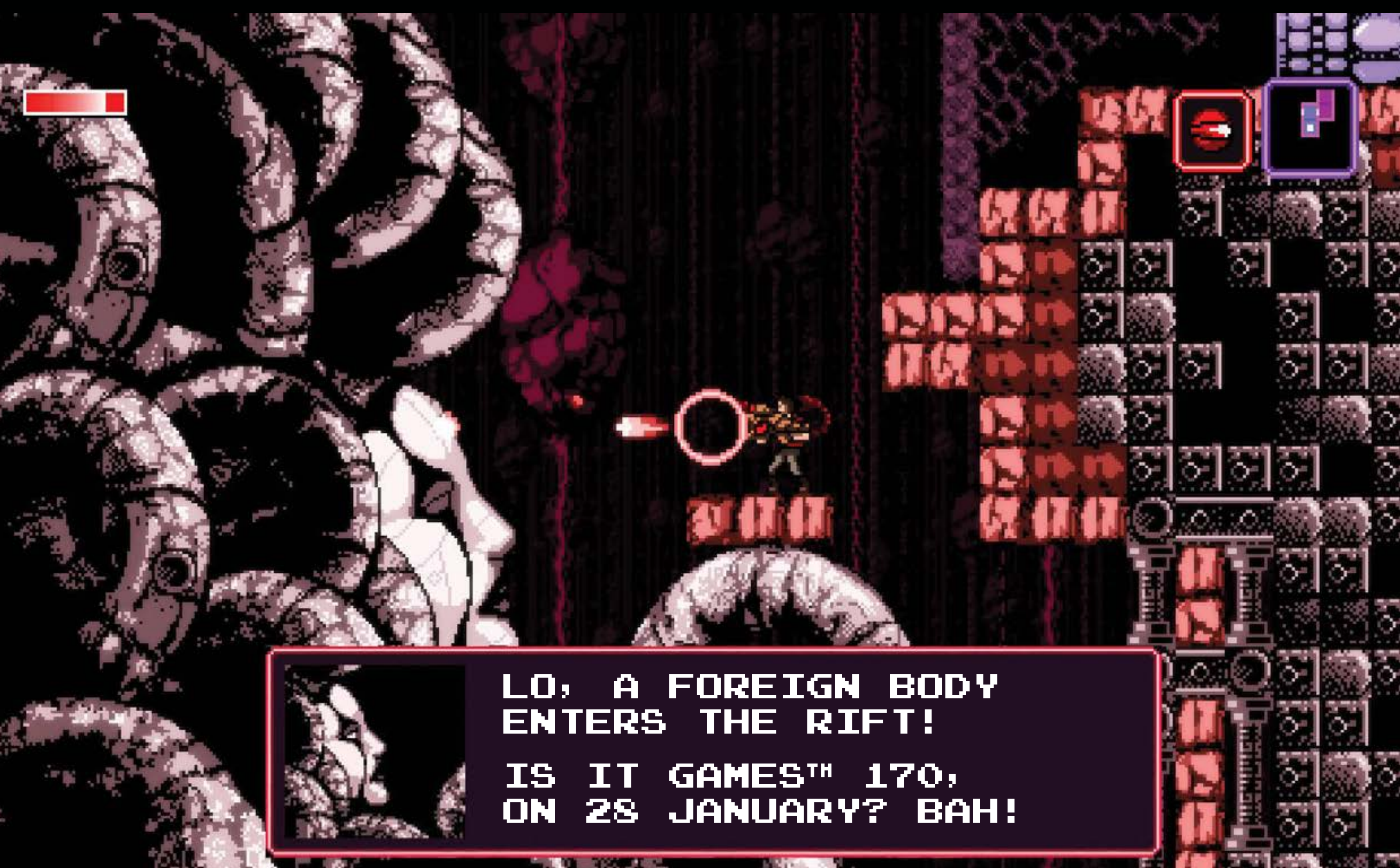




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